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ABSTRACT

Changes in our world have made it more difficult for children to find protected, exciting places to play and interesting, satisfactory things to play with. This edited volume, resulting from the collaboration of Bank Street College (New York, New York), Erikson Institute (Chicago, Illinois), Pacific Oaks College (Pasadena, California), and Wheelock College (Boston, Massachusetts), focuses on children's play and how their play and learning may be supported in early childhood settings. Section 1 examines play education research and suggests methods for training professionals to facilitate play. Chapters are: (1) "Play in Early Childhood Development and Education: Issues and Questions" (Joan B. McLane and Others); (2) "The Value of Play as Perceived by Wheelock College Freshmen" (Edgar Klugman); (3) "The Meaning of Play: Perspectives from Pacific Oaks College," (Mary Beth Lakin); (4) "Reflections on Play: Learning from Student Teacher Placements," (Richard Feldman); and (5) "Constructing Knowledge about Play: Case Method and Teacher Education," (Amelia Klein). Section 2 describes cultural experiences to understand how play is regarded and supported from within various cultures. Chapters are: (1) "Endangered Play, Endangered Development: A Constructivist View of the Role of Play in Development and Learning" (Diane E. Levin); (2) "The Role of Play in the Acculturation Process" (Renatta M. Cooper); and (3) "'They Can't Even Play Right!': Cultural Myopia in the Analysis of Play--Cultural Perspectives on Human Development" (Terry Meier and Peter Murrell). Section 3 encourages expanded explanations of children's play to advocate more effectively for children. Chapters are: (1) "On-the-Job Training: Children's Play and Work" (Vicki Bartolini); (2) "The Role of Play in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings" (Catherine Marchant and Cheryl Render Brown); and (3) "Implementing Play in Hospitals: Values and Viewpoints" (Joan Fernbach Kingson and others). (The bibliography contains approximately 150 references.) (KDFB)

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# Topics

## 2

# Playing for Keeps

Edited by
Amy L. Phillips

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# Topics in Early Childhood Education

## Playing for Keeps

# Topics in
# Early Childhood Education

## Playing for Keeps:
## Supporting Children's Play

Bank Street College
Erikson Institute
Pacific Oaks College
Wheelock College

Edited for the Consortium by
Amy L. Phillips
as Volume Two in our series
Topics in Early Childhood Education

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Tom Collins, Children's Hospital Oakland, Oakland, CA
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# Introduction

## The Historical Frame

### Four-College Collaborations on Play

In 1995, Bank Street College, Erikson Institute, Pacific Oaks College, and Wheelock College made a formal declaration that we shared many missions and would collaborate to achieve them. The goals of our Four-College Consortium[1] are several:

- to provide national leadership in the field of early childhood education;
- to formulate public policy related to children and families;
- to promote policies, programs, and research that benefit young children;
- to address, in a unified manner, ongoing concerns of professionals in the field;
- to conduct research in aspects of child and family development.

We have chosen to focus on these goals because each consortium institution has a history of responding to the social needs of young children and their families. In addition, each supports a critical mass of faculty focusing on the wide spectrum of early care and education. There are many connecting links among our colleges:

- Each has done pioneering work in child development and each is successful in and open to taking the next steps as the field of early childhood education has moved and changed;
- Each is a private college that has undertaken a public mission;

---

[1] Text on consortium initiatives is adapted from the description in Volume One of this series, ***Transformational Leadership***, edited by Elizabeth Jones. The consortium was formerly called the Inter-Institutional Early Childhood Collaborative.

☐ Each takes account of and values the cycle of human development from before birth through adulthood;

☐ Each sees the importance of early childhood/family/community/cultural approaches to both child and adult learners;

☐ Each focuses on developing college-level programs on "a human scale" with the concomitant qualities of respect and caring;

☐ Each approaches adult learning from a developmental perspective;

☐ Each supports the National Association for the Education of Young Children definition of early childhood as birth through age eight;

☐ Each accepts institutional responsibility for a clear, well-supported urban agenda.

As part of our efforts, we have committed ourselves to producing, with the much-appreciated support of Redleaf Press, a series of volumes, *Topics in Early Childhood Education,* designed to inform one another and our readers as our work develops. All lead authors in this particular volume teach at consortium colleges and share an abiding interest in this topic's focus: the support of children's play.

A growing movement to put play at the forefront of our agenda for children has taken shape over the last decade. Through a large network of participants (eight hundred by 1994, according to Klugman, 1995) in the influential Play, Policy, and Practice Caucus in NAEYC as well as this collaborative of four leading early childhood institutions, international conferences, and publications such as Redleaf Press's *Play, Policy, and Practice* (Klugman, 1995), "aspects of a national play agenda are now being conceptualized, articulated, and debated" (Klugman, 1995, p. xiii).

The movement, as illustrated in this book, features intense professional curiosity and critique about our own practice, its accomplishments, and the limits of our solipsisms. We want to better understand how children actually play today and what they need to support their play and learning. We want to be more effective in responding to the violence in children's and our own lives and to better understand how violence affects and can be affected by play. At the same time, we refuse to limit our analysis to the deficits-based orientations of the past, knowing how much more effective it is to build from strengths and resiliencies, as is so often demonstrated when children play. Weaving throughout the debate are questions about how to better understand one another's work in the play arena; how to be more inclusive of definitions of play; how to locate deeply occurring play, how to address real constrictions on children's opportunities to play, and how to capitalize on the power of play to build healthy children and societies.

Two challenges this volume takes on are to celebrate differences among us and to refuse to generalize when all sides of the stories have not been heard (although the stories are indeed told, and told very well), such as when a formative body of published academic research and thinking is based primarily in Western European traditions, as seemed to be the case with play until quite recently (Roopnarine and Johnson, 1995; Klugman, 1995). But at the same time that we celebrate true diversity, we accept the challenge to set priorities collaboratively so that targets can be drawn and aimed for, advocacy can become campaign-like in its intensity (Lawson and Hooper-Briar, 1996), analysis of how to incorporate both local and "to-scale" change initiatives can be realistic and move beyond rhetoric, and "efforts [can] be additive rather than fragmented; cohesive rather than following separate pathways" (Klugman, 1995, p. 204). Readers are heartily welcome to join this conversation and, we hope, to help shape it.

## The Playful Frame

## Such a Pond, Such a Garden

> *One day, Mama and I were sitting at home, like we did almost every day. She used to get* McCall's *magazine for the sewing patterns. She'd gone to seamstress school in Atlantic City, and she could sew anything. But* McCall's *also provided me with cutout dolls, The Betsy McCall dolls.*
>
> *(I enjoyed playing with paper dolls, just as I enjoyed playing with puppets and marionettes. My all-time favorite Christmas present was a Jerry Mahoney ventriloquist dummy and a tap-dancing black minstrel known as Dancing Dan the Colored Man. I wish we had kept that thing: you sang or spoke into a microphone, and Dancing Dan's legs and feet would go this way and that, propelled by a moving platform activated by the sound of your voice.*
>
> *(It never occurred to me that it was racist; I just thought it odd that he was so very dark and that his lips were so big and red.)*
>
> *Anyway, Mama and I were at home one weekday, and she was sewing on her magnificent Singer sewing machine, and Betsy and I were getting down to some serious business in the middle of our kitchen floor. . . .*
>
> —Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

> *Each portion of matter may be conceived of as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fishes. But each branch of the plant, each member of the animal, each drop of its humors, is also such a garden or such a pond.*
>
> —Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

When I ask my education students to recall their early play experiences, their faces soften, their eyes get merry and tip-tilted, and they talk in dreamy, deeper voices. They won't *let* me rush them on this one: they actually ask right out for silent time to muse, to coax out dormant memories. And right in front of me they seem to reenter the places they went when they played in the back room, backyard, back lot. We hear about alternate universes reached when sitting on just *these* tree branches; about the journey up the side of a "new" house when the picnic table got unexpectedly propped against the old one; about the scrub lot where old cans rusted beautifully at the base of old foundations. This serious dreaminess has happened every time I ask about early play just right: allowing time enough to let the intimate immensities stir; using the proper free-associative frame (describe whatever comes to you, censor nothing, unconditionally accept).

These are some of the most vivid memories I have of teaching and seem to be some of the most vivid memories students have of their childhoods. It is then that I recall that play is the *serious business we get down to* when we are children, to use Gates's charming description. It is a way of joining with and discovering life at one and the same time: through Betsy McCall's paper dolls (whatever Skip Gates wanted them to get up to just then); by straddling the sturdiest, most polished tree branches (as the power nodes through which alternate universes can best be entered); by scaling that upended picnic table (as the portal to a new house standing in the place of the usual one); or while observing those rust-and-silver flashing cans (as the remains of some unknown, ancient civilization about to be deciphered using sound archeological techniques).

These memories often embody a particular, *surrounding* place, a locus from which all things are possible, *greater than but equal to* itself, a place *so* itself it can temporarily respond as any other—whether a kitchen floor near Mama, a well-polished tree branch, an unexpectedly positioned table, or a former trash heap. Each becomes *such a garden, such a pond*, as Leibniz describes the multivalent universe of life. While adults are seldom tangibly present when these memories are recounted, it is also clear that this place is also a place-in-relation, "just close enough" to adults. Gates's anecdote suggests children choose to play where the conditions are right and near enough to those that help provide those conditions.

Gates's anecdote suggests that children prefer particular objects, charged or banal as adults may find them, for subtle reasons of their own. They gather their meanings while they may and about what they wish. Gates suggests that children sense when a toy is "odd," but also seem to have a great instinct for scoping out the possibilities any toy has in relation to their own serious business. They are not abstractly aware of the oddities of their choices and the intersections of the worlds their choices represent until later, when they may look back and think about them. (This is not to say that adults must not take responsibility for the way they create and frame toys' use.)

But notice a recurring question that seems to have become a refrain: do children still find these protected, exciting places, these interesting and satisfactory things with which to play? Do they still grab for their own play time and place from what's available or can be scrounged up or happened upon? Can they find them even when they must play away from windows so a stray bullet cannot reach them? even when TV's seductions may encroach radically on their spontaneous play time, even when they may be hurried or harried and so busy at school and/or at day care all day that opportunities for unsupervised play seem few and far between? Do they go to those places when adult insanities and inanities (be they violence or overprogramming or commercial sandbagging) somehow overlook them?

In our darkest hours, we ask questions to which we fear the answers. Will children forget how to play? Will they lose their childhoods? Are children who seem like they could not possibly have the time to play deeply like adults who cannot seem to sleep deeply and who miss formative experiences that enable them to survive and prosper? Are children who are living with violence (or even deluged with media violence) subject to pressures like those that suppressed deep play among Israeli children during times of missile attack (Bat-Zion, 1995)? Have we come to the point where we cannot trust the power of childhood to assert itself (as presumably it has found a way to do in almost every generation before us, or how would our students have managed to play deeply enough to remember it so fondly)?

We know there is real reason for concern. As participants in institutional settings of all kinds, we know how rare it is to see children playing intently and over sustained periods. And yet, while committed to addressing serious concerns, we also remain committed to preserving, locating, and supporting the strengths of all children and of their play. The authors you will next read recognize there is more to play—a "complex, elusive phenomenon," as the first authors state—than first meets our eyes (wearing whatever lenses of generation and affiliation) and that one can underestimate how rich is the play of children different from ourselves, or of those who do things differently now than we did when we were children. Consortium participants look forward to discovering play's richness and supporting its abundance.

Simply put, the authors in this volume value the play of children immensely. They see the need to value and build supports for it now that childhood seems to be protected less. They work with adults with whom they hope to share these values and skills (beginning often by calling up their adult students' fond memories of play with all its intricacies of spirit and of place). They inquire into how we can best support *all* children's play in *all* children's ways. They write here with a passion that suggests we are all "playing for keeps"—for children and for the adults they become, for the play memories they remember and wish to impart to the children they support, and so on and on.

# Section One

## Perspectives on Research and Teaching for the Support of Play

Authors in this section present results of research into the state of play education and make suggestions about some of the educational methods suited to training future professionals who will facilitate play. During its formative stages, the Four-College Consortium envisioned a research agenda: first stages included pilot studies, three of which are presented here, designed to look carefully at the array of views we hold about play and the ways in which these views influence our own practice. Who holds differing opinions, and what influences the development of these opinions? How well do we understand and value opinions different from our own? Are some opinions supported by clear evidence, or are all justifiable in some manner or in some context? How have those holding these varied opinions acted as a consequence to support or undermine play? Could understanding these varied perspectives better help us to support play better (if this is indeed necessary)?

Three kinds of research are featured here, each giving us a different "take" on these questions: a pilot observation, an interview, and a forced-choice questionnaire design (chapter One); a survey of incoming freshman (chapter Two); and a qualitative analysis of play culture at one institution (chapter Three). In this volume, the authors of these initial studies define a focus for the next phase of research: work that can develop an inclusive, diverse foundational literature/research base more effective in advocating for play.

In chapter One, faculty members from two colleges describe how issues and questions were raised during a year-long seminar that highlighted how "complex and elusive" play is and the significant "uncertainty and disagreement" about play's significance and value, particularly in educational settings. In order to avoid doing new work that would, at best, be limited, and more likely would be inaccurate and misleading, participants reached a consensus to suspend the assumption that there was only one right way of understanding the links between play, child development, and learning. This liberating choice led to an exploratory pilot (based at Erikson Institute) to help members better understand the basis for differences in early childhood practice.

The Erikson pilot was designed to develop a sense of the range of several things: views on the value and relevance of play for learning and development; knowledge bases regarding play theory and research; practices in the facilitation of play in early childhood settings; and personal experiences, culture, SES, education, and ethnicity as they impacted views on play. The pilot featured structured early childhood classroom observations and open-ended interviews/forced-choice questionnaires with a range of people working with children (including the observed teachers). Preliminary analysis indicated a strong valuing of play but considerable difference in ideas about how play was defined, what it did for children, its appropriateness in particular settings, and the proper role of adult facilitators. The findings suggested that much of this variability may be cultural and ethnic. The literature review and extensive bibliography are useful for referring readers to the latest research linking play to various strands in child development, such as possible connections between play and literacy, and between symbolic and language development. It incorporates sociocultural perspectives on the difficult, critical question of "whose knowledge and beliefs about child development will be given priority in early childhood settings."

In chapter Two's survey of Wheelock College freshmen, Ed

Klugman underscores the importance of looking closely at the groups with whom we communicate about play. These students chose Wheelock because of an interest in children and families and an intention to pursue a professional specialization in education and/or human services. The survey was shaped to acquire a preliminary understanding of the relationships between generational shifts in play experiences, students' own play histories, later college and placement site experiences, and the extent to which play figures in students' professional identities and repertoire (given an already solid interest in some aspect of the field). The research suggests that the consortium colleges need to be more responsive to the play-learning needs of each generation and its unique mixtures of experiences, perceptions, and expectations.

Klugman asked open-ended questions about students' memories of play at home, in school, and about the role of play in learning. Standouts included respondents' memories of play at recess, in the neighborhood, outdoors, with physical activity, and in dramatic and imaginative contexts. Memories of play at home seemed more spontaneous and free than at school, and social experiences were central in a significant number of responses. Many students perceived a strong connection between play and social development, and a more general sense of a connection between play and learning, but their characterizations of its nature were not very elaborate or specific. This finding underscores the need to develop and model language and practice to "help future professionals to recognize, contemplate, and articulate the connections." Klugman also suggests that research protocols more sensitive to eliciting cultural differences than this initial design will be essential. The European-American basis of much foundational literature, says Klugman, means that this shift in paradigm is long overdue.

Mary Beth Lakin reveals the kaleidoscopic meanings of play in the varied perspectives of students enrolled in the play-based Curriculum Research Seminar at Pacific Oaks College. She considers the challenge for pedagogy that this rich mixture of opinions presents in the context of a college founded as a Quaker venture toward "a more peaceable world" and one that is consistently supportive of early education and child study, with play as a cornerstone. Lakin considers how faculty members' interests in progressive education, human development, developmentally appropriate practice, arts in education, emergent curriculum, therapeutic settings, and bicultural, multiethnic contexts have themselves emerged with the support of the college's foundation. Today, Lakin suggests, it is important for all educators of young children to continue to examine the historical and cultural roots of our definitions of play, the language and concepts we use in our discussions about play, and the ways in which we communicate about play to groups concerned with children.

Complementing the array of research designs are the next two articles on practice. In chapter Four, Feldman uses short case vignettes to illustrate some obstacles and challenges to facilitating deep, differentiated play in typical classroom and school settings, even when these are otherwise satisfactory sites for the training of graduate students of education in other ways.

In chapter Five, Klein offers the case method, a rich and differentiated model for teaching teachers-to-be about play that highlights a possible method for creating more effective classroom practice. Klein's model underscores the usefulness of the Feldman case-referencing strategy in bringing us inside the classroom to grapple with recalcitrant problems that often keep children's play from reaching fuller expression in school. Klein offers readers a tested teaching method designed to value and build upon different perspectives. Participants can together consider a case that has been carefully constructed from authentic experience and designed to illuminate the complexity and richness of human situations. Through the process of discussion, analysis, and collaborative problem solving, the case method provides an interactive forum in which knowledge about the nature, value, and purpose of play in early care and education for children from birth to eight years of age can be constructed. The paper proposes ways to make case-based teaching an integral part of adult education programs.

1

# Play in Early Childhood Development and Education: Issues and Questions

Joan B. McLane and Julie Spielberger
Erikson Institute

Edgar Klugman
Wheelock College

*"Play is being involved, play is learning, it is a part of learning . . . a growing and learning process."*

*"I feel play is okay, but time should still be set aside for learning because when you go to elementary school, you know, there's not going to be any play."*

*To be "a facilitator, to observe the children, not enter in . . ."*

*"I need to be involved in the children's play, that's the key."*

—Views on play and the teacher's role in play from two Head Start teachers

Play is a complex, elusive phenomenon that has been much studied but is still incompletely understood. Nevertheless, play has long held a central place in child development theory and practice, generating a rich body of theoretical and empirical knowledge. Currently, there appear to be both uncertainty and disagreement in the field of early childhood concerning the developmental significance and educational value of play, particularly play in institutional settings. Views on play range along a continuum. At one end, there is the conviction that play is the primary—or the *only*—

"developmentally appropriate" means by which young children develop and learn. At the other end is the belief that play is essentially amusement and recreation but that it plays no role in children's development, learning, or education. Among those who value play, there is disagreement about the role of adults in children's play; some regard play as a sacrosanct activity that should be left entirely to children's direction, while others consider it an opportunity for teachers to interact and instruct. These differing perspectives on play intersect with two other concerns prevalent among early childhood educators today. The first is a perceived sense of pressure to make preschool and kindergarten programs more "academic," more like elementary school, and, by implication, less playful (Klugman and Smilansky, 1990; Glickman, 1984; Christie, 1991). The second is an increasing awareness among educators that child development knowledge and practice, once assumed to be universal, are, in fact, deeply rooted in local and specific cultural beliefs, values, and experience (Delpit, 1988; Rogoff, 1990, 1993).

## Play: Work in Progress

Erikson Institute, on behalf of the Four-College Consortium, recently completed an exploratory pilot study on how play is perceived and valued and how it is used and facilitated among a small group of early childhood teachers, administrators, and college educators in the Chicago area. The impetus for this study emerged during a year-long consortium seminar on play organized by Edgar Klugman at Wheelock College between 1993–1994. Early in the seminar, participants shared concerns about the fragile status of play in early childhood education, and many felt that it was important for the consortium to make a statement about its view on the importance of play. However, as our discussions progressed, we realized that we needed more information on the status of play in the field, on the beliefs, values, and practices of early childhood teachers and administrators, and on the educators who prepare professionals at the college and university level. This led to the pilot study in which we developed the methodology for a larger research project to be undertaken by the consortium.

The pilot study has made us realize the enormity and complexity of conducting research on play in early childhood education—it is a substantial and complex endeavor. It is substantial because of the centrality of play in early childhood theory, research, and practice. It is complex because practitioners' knowledge, beliefs, and values are deeply rooted in personal and cultural experience and may be difficult to access. Differences in how play is perceived and valued may indicate either or both of the following: a lag between new knowledge about play research and current practice and/or differences in cultural goals and values as a significant part of the developmental and educational process. That is, concerns and criticisms about play in early childhood education may reflect unfamiliarity with the wealth of recent research on play and/or cultural perspectives and values that do not see play as having a central role in early development, particularly in cognitive aspects of development. Different perspectives on play may be the result of a communication gap if educators are ***not aware*** that their own or others' cultural beliefs and values are likely to affect perceptions of play. We believe that it is important to understand the range of perceptions on play and the reasons for them in order to foster communication among college educators, program administrators, and classroom teachers.

## Play Theory and Research

An enormous amount of research and theory on play has emerged in recent years, much of it exploring links between play and various aspects of children's cognitive development. Some of this research has looked at possible links between play and early literacy development (Christie, 1990, 1991; Dyson, 1986, 1990; Gundlach, 1992; Gundlach, et al., 1985; Isenberg and Jacob, 1983; McLane and McNamee, 1990; Pelligrini, 1985; 1991; Vygotsky, 1978); play and symbolic development (Fein, 1975, 1979, 1981; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Wolf and Gardner, 1979); and play and language development (Bruner, 1983, 1986; Garvey, 1984, 1990; Garvey and Berndt, 1977; Haight and Miller, 1993). Much of this and other recent developmental research has focused on play in different cultural and educational settings, often from a Vygotskian or sociocultural perspective (Berk, 1994; Farver, 1993; Fernald and O'Neill, 1993; Gaskins, 1994; Göncü and Kessel, 1984; Haight and Miller, 1993; MacDonald, 1993;

Nicolopoulou, 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, et al., 1993; Roopnarine, et al., 1993; Schwartzman, 1978; Zukow, 1981).

Unlike earlier research and theory reflecting either a psychoanalytic or a Piagetian framework, research conducted in a Vygotskian/sociocultural framework emphasizes the role of the social and cultural contexts. This means that the role of other people in the child's world—parents, siblings, teachers, peers—will be an important factor in analyzing how children play and what they gain from their play. A sociocultural perspective also implies that cultural tasks, values, and beliefs affect how play is marked, perceived, and understood and that the developmental consequences of play may reflect how it is valued and supported in a particular setting.

## Practitioners' Beliefs

The study of knowledge, beliefs, and values about educational goals and methods, including the appropriateness of play in the early childhood classroom, is complicated. As Pajares points out, the beliefs of teachers and other practitioners are likely to be deeply rooted, hard to ascertain, and even harder to change. However, for these very reasons, they have a powerful impact on practice and are worth investigating:

> Attention to the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot. The study of beliefs is critical to education precisely because, as Kagan (1992) concluded, "the more one reads studies of teacher belief, the more strongly one suspects that this piebald of personal knowledge lies at the very heart of teaching" (Pajares, 1995, p. 85).

Furthermore, a sociocultural context suggests that we cannot assume that we understand what other teachers, administrators, and teacher educators know and believe or what they *should* know and believe, nor can we dismiss differing views on play as "misguided" or "uninformed." As Kessler observes,

> What appears to be a debate between those who are well-informed by current research in child development and those

> who are not is, in reality, a debate between individuals who hold different values about the purposes of schooling, what counts as legitimate knowledge, and presumably the nature of the good life and the just society (Kessler, 1991, p. 193).

We must, in other words, acknowledge that we may not know or understand what other practitioners know or believe because all child development knowledge is "local" in the sense that it reflects specific cultural contexts (Delpit, 1988; Rogoff, 1990, 1993). This means that such knowledge is, at best, an uncertain and ambiguous base for practice because it raises the difficult question of *whose* knowledge and beliefs about child development will be given priority in early childhood settings (Jipson, 1991; Stott and Bowman, in press).

## Research Questions

In our pilot study we devised methodology (classroom observation of teachers and interviews and questionnaires for teachers, administrators, and college educators) to begin answering the following questions: What is the range of views on the value and relevance of play for early childhood development and education among teachers, directors, and educators? What is the range in the knowledge base of play theory and research among early childhood teachers and administrators? In particular, what are the prevailing views on the relationship between play and various aspects of cognitive and literacy development? What is the range of ways play is incorporated and implemented into programs for young children? What is the overlap between different groups' perspectives on play and prevailing research in the field? If there are differences in beliefs, attitudes, and practices relating to play, what are they, and how are they distributed? Finally, do different perceptions of play and its developmental and educational purposes relate to differences in SES, culture, education, and ethnicity? Answers to these questions should facilitate discussions on play within and among groups of early childhood professionals and should help in understanding where and how recent research on play can most effectively be communicated and utilized.

## Research Methods

### Classroom Observation

Our protocol is designed to describe the range of children's pretend play activities and teacher involvement in pretend play and to compare teachers' stated beliefs and attitudes toward such play with their classroom practices. This form focuses on (1) the availability, variety, quantity, quality, and condition of play materials; (2) how classroom materials and space are organized for play; (3) the daily schedule of activities, including the length of time allotted for "free play;" (4) the kinds of interactions that occur between teachers and children during pretend play; (5) the ways teachers encourage or discourage children's pretend play; and (6) the ways and extent to which teachers participate in children's pretend play. We found that observations also make it possible to query teachers during interviews about specific classroom events and interactions. (For example, we observed a child crawling around the classroom pretending to be a cat. After several minutes of this play, the teacher directed him to come to the art table and draw. We later asked the teacher about this, and she explained that this child often pretended to be a cat as a social overture to other children and that she wanted him to know he could play other roles as well; thus, we learned that what had seemed to us an interference in a child's play was, for this teacher, an indication of her concern for the child's self-esteem.)

### Interviews

We asked about play from a variety of perspectives, including what respondents remembered about play from their own childhood and their educational training, their past experiences in the field of early childhood education, as well as what they thought about their most recent, day-to-day play-related experiences working with children in the classroom or with supervising and training teachers around play. In developing this interview, our chief objective was to ascertain respondents' "true," personal beliefs about play, which may differ from what they have been told by administrators or educators (see Pajares, 1992). In addition, we sought to understand practitioners' goals for the care and education of young children and their views on working with parents on the issue of play. In order to construct a quantitative measure of beliefs and practices to supplement the qualitative interview data, we developed a structured questionnaire that employed a five-point, forced-choice Likert scale for respondents to fill out independently after the interview. The questionnaire was designed to differentiate among beliefs about the importance of various activities in an early childhood program, particularly play activities.

## Preliminary Findings

Based on responses to the interview questions in our pilot study, we have begun to develop categories for interpreting the qualitative data. (This is an evolving process, and we expect other categories will emerge as more data are collected and analyzed.) Some of our initial categories are based on the ways teachers define play, their perceptions of the developmental and educational consequences of play, their views of the adult role in children's play, their goals for children's development, and the sources of their knowledge and beliefs about play. All of the respondents in our small sample, with the exception of one Head Start teacher, seemed to value play for young children. However, they differed in their definitions of play and its developmental and educational consequences, and in whether or not they considered it an essential preschool educational component. They also differed in their opinions about whether or not teachers should participate in children's play, and, if so, how they should do so. Based on our interviews, teachers' beliefs about play appear to stem not only from their professional training and work with children but also from their own childhood experiences. These, in turn, would suggest that beliefs and practices relating to play may vary considerably among different ethnic and cultural groups.

For example, one African-American Head Start teacher described the evolution of her ideas about play as follows:

> [At the beginning] I was like some of the parents now—"All my child does is just play at school." You know, you have to get an understanding of what is play, and when I was a parent in Head Start, I didn't understand that. Not until I entered the classroom was I able to see with my own eyes what they were learning at the sand table or the water table. And going

> back to school, receiving more child development classes, that has really given me a great understanding. . . . And I worked with some really great teachers, models, wonderful models.

The director of a Chinese-American day care program told us that teachers' childhood experiences affect their beliefs and practices more than their professional training does:

> China and Hong Kong are the two places my teachers are from. The way you grow up is the way teachers believe, more so than any training; [it] kind of takes over. . . . Unless teachers have had a lot of training here [in the United States], and unless they were brought up here with their parents, [some of the harder roles for teachers] have to do with extension of play and conversation. . . . Since our teachers didn't have that kind of training [or] upbringing, [they] go back to . . . how [they've] been brought up and the significant learning experiences in [their] lives.

Finally, our data also suggest there are gaps between current research and academic thinking about play (Dyson, 1986, 1989; Gundlach, 1982; Pelligrini and Galda, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and current practice in the field. This seems particularly true with respect to the possible relationships between play and the development of symbolic, abstract thinking and between play and the development of literacy.

Our preliminary findings suggest that early childhood professionals maintain a range of perspectives on play in the early childhood classroom that reflect differences in knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices. These are rooted in differences in personal, cultural, and educational experience. We believe these merit further investigation because play is so intimately tied to notions of what is developmentally and educationally "appropriate" for young children. The findings from such an inquiry will be particularly important for those who train and supervise early childhood classroom teachers.

## 2

# The Value of Play as Perceived by Wheelock College Freshman

Edgar Klugman
Wheelock College

It is commonly accepted that play is an organic, necessary, and natural activity for children (Bat-Zion, 1995; Brown, 1994; Piers and Landau, 1980; Millar, 1968). And yet, as one looks at what happens to children today in both formal and informal settings, it seems as if their lives are being increasingly structured and controled to the detriment of their play (Elkind, 1988, 1994; Tappano, 1996). As a result, what has been thought of as play is now being removed from children's lives rather than supported, enhanced, or reinforced (Klugman and Fasoli, 1995; Hughes, 1995; Spodek and Saracho, 1991).

Important links between play and learning have received much attention from researchers over the last several decades (Piaget; 1962; Bredekamp, 1987; Smilansky, 1968). Yet many barriers are still raised against the position that play is an essential core of the early childhood program (Elkind, 1990). These barriers exist despite the fact that the leading professional organization in the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has stated that play is both essential and developmentally appropriate for young children (Bredekamp, 1987). The organization's numerous publications and position statements on this subject over the last decade have emphasized this stance (Bredekamp, 1987; Rogers and Sawyers, 1988).

Looking at the perceptions of children's play held by students who enter undergraduate professional preparation programs in early childhood care and education may offer additional insight and may point toward the most efficacious directions for work in this area. What students entering an early childhood program already understand about play can yield important perspectives on ways to cohesively link learning and play as the center pole of early childhood curriculum.

## The Study

Understanding the knowledge base of incoming freshmen can assist in efforts to find ways to shape programs, curriculum, and policy and to improve responsiveness to students' needs and to the emerging requirements of the field. This research effort has been focused on defining children's play more specifically and coherently. The research focus has been two-fold:

1. to discover the level and extent of knowledge about play held by entry-level students at Wheelock College through helping them to draw upon their own personal recollections of playing as children;

and

2. to study how recollections of playing as children may have influenced these students' current perceptions of children's play and its relationship to learning, particularly to school learning.

Wheelock College was the setting selected for this study. Wheelock focuses at the undergraduate level on early care and education, child life, and social work. The fact that the focus of the college is on human services has added an important dimension to the study. Students entering as freshmen are a self-selected group already identified as being "interested in work with children."

A useful aspect of the study is its potential for helping to identify gaps in programs. New directions may well emerge for the design or redesign of early childhood and child life preparation programs that can more effectively prepare students entering the field to support the play of young children.

The questionnaires[1] were administered to all incoming Wheelock freshmen in fall 1994. The questionnaire contained the following three open-ended questions designed to determine entering students' currently held perceptions and insights about play and learning:

1. What are your memories of your own play at home as you were growing up?

2. What are your memories of your play experiences at school?

3. What do you see as the role of play in learning?

## Demographics of the Respondents

One hundred sixty-nine responses to the questionnaire were received from a total of 169 freshmen. Of these, 144 were caucasian female respondents; 6 were caucasian male respondents; 10 were black female respondents; 4 were hispanic female respondents; 4 were Asian female respondents, and 1 was an Asian male respondent. The great majority of the respondents were entering freshmen who fell between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. There were 11 older freshmen whose ages ranged from 20 through 34. There were four individuals who did not indicate an age.

The questionnaire was administered to all freshmen during the same week in a course required for all freshmen. For this reason, there was a 100 percent return rate.

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[1] A copy of the questionnaire is included as Appendix A.

## Findings

### Some General Observations

Researchers acknowledge that personal background and experience contribute substantially to the base upon which professional preparation is built. Holborn and Wideen (1988), in their discussion of individuals preparing for teaching, describe how preservice teachers base their views upon assumptions and beliefs formed as a result of their personal schooling experiences. Lortie (1975) refers to this schooling experience as ***an apprenticeship of observation***, while Duckworth (1987) refers to this phenomenon ***as territories of knowledge*** gained over the thirteen-year period of participation in formal teaching and learning settings prior to college. It would follow that past play experiences contribute substantially to an adult's sense of what play is and to its value as part of the school experience. An understanding of how students perceive play can provide guidance in the preparation programs for human service practitioners.

### Play Memories of Home and School

Children's play settings appear wherever children are found. In this study, a differentiation between home and school play was structured in order to see whether setting created differences in recollections of childhood play, and if so, what the differences might be. If it was found that there were "setting" differences, the ongoing investigation could focus on gaining understanding of the implications, both for future course development and for programs of study. Questions were designed broadly to elicit students' memories about their own play experiences as children at home and at school, without the added specific requirement for a differentiation between outdoor play and indoor play activity.

#### *Memories of Play at Home*

One hundred eighteen responses indicated that much of the remembered play "at home" actually took place in neighborhoods, with siblings, neighbors, and/or friend(s). This reported play occurred most frequently outdoors and is illustrated by the following responses.

> *I played a lot with the kids in my neighborhood. We liked to play in the fields behind my house.*
>
> *Often I would be racing around on my bike, swinging from and climbing trees. Playing house to playing in the dirt with race cars, to playing Barbie and GI Joe with my brother.*
>
> *I played a lot outdoors, with friends and family. I remember we used to play "town," hide-and-go-seek, house, and kickball.*
>
> *My memories of playing at home were being able to run around outside and play on the play gym and being able to ride my bike.*

A smaller number of students recalled playing inside their homes and focusing on toys and friends.

> *I remember having a kitchen set, dolls, and many other toys that I played with. I spent a lot of time playing house with my friends or playing store.*
>
> *I loved dolls and had lots of Barbies. I would play with those, and my brother and I loved Legos, and we'd build things. I had a kitchen set, so we would play house. I remember playing with Tinker Toys. I also liked playing games with the family like Chutes and Ladders. I loved playing with my toys.*

Twenty respondents indicated that adults assumed a role in their "home play."

> *I have a large family, so there was always someone to play with. My mom and dad loved to be a part of play time with us.*
>
> *I have fond memories. My parents were and still are very involved in my life. As a child I would dress my dad up with makeup and make him eat what I "baked" at my little kitchen set. Both my parents seemed like they had been parents before because they were so good at it.*
>
> *I remember both of my parents playing educational as well as fun games with me.*

### *Memories of Play at School*

When respondents recalled their play at school, twenty-six included in their descriptions of play an acceptance of "teacher-directed activities" as play. Some sample responses below help to illustrate.

> *In grammar school . . . the only "playtime" we had was during gym [class].*
>
> *Most of the games were already thought up by the teacher and they didn't leave much open for our imagination.*
>
> *At school we would play math games and grammar games.*

One gets a feeling that students sensed more freedom to play out-of-doors both at home and at school (see "Recess," below). However, when recalling the indoor environment, respondents apparently felt more constricted at school than they did at home. The teachers directed what the play would be (i.e., gym class or games focused on specific subject areas). In contrast, there was generally a memory of greater freedom in the home to self-select playmates and to freely create play activities with siblings, peers, and parents.

### Recess

The respondents' memories of play experiences at school seemed to reflect the ways in which their school's cultures affected and helped them to form ideas about what constituted play in a school setting. The questionnaire design did not require respondents to differentiate between early childhood and later childhood programs. As a result, the age group to which a given response refers is sometimes unclear. However, it is likely that when respondents used the term *recess* they were referring to children in grades K–6, as in the following.

> *I remember that recess was one of the most exciting times of the day for me. At recess we jumped rope, played tag, played with snow in the wintertime, and, when we got older, talking to boys became very exciting.*
>
> *During morning recess and lunch recess, we would run around the playground and play on the slides and [jungle] gyms.*

> *When we got old enough to go outside, there was hopscotch, basketball, dodge ball, and kickball.*

The largest number of respondents (59) to question two (*What are your memories of your play experience at school?*) indicated that large-muscle activities involving playground equipment (jungle gym, basketball hoop, slide, and swings) comprised most of what they remembered as "play at school." To this number can be added the third-largest number of responses (44), which included outdoor, large-muscle activities such as "games with rules" like basketball, soccer, kickball, and dodgeball. Thirty-one respondents to question two reported their memories of play at school as just "recess." This group of respondents did not define or elaborate upon their single-word responses.

It appears that "recess," as it was (and may still be) defined in many schools, is a time when children can be physically active, usually outdoors, and independent of adult supervision, essentially fending for themselves. Interestingly enough, this response was similar to the respondents' memories of play at home, in which many respondents saw play as something that took place out-of-doors and that allowed for independence and the selection of their own friendship groupings.

Although some respondents reported recess as a highlight of the school day, a small minority of respondents (5) disliked and anticipated it with fear and even a sense of failure. These five referred to what can be termed feelings of abandonment by adults and vulnerability to other children during recess. This preliminary finding will require more in-depth interviewing to determine whether these reactions were caused by divergent play preferences or styles. Differences in attitudes about fine-motor activities, dramatic or sociodramatic play, or other kinds of social experience with peers may be found to be important factors in children's reactions to various play settings or experiences.

## Dramatic/Imaginative Play

The second largest number of answers to question two (49) indicated that these respondents remembered their early play as having had important dramatic/imaginative components. The majority of these components clustered within indoor environments. Respondents remembered participating in dramatic and sociodramatic play such as blocks, house play, doll house play, and constructive play with puzzles, paint, playdough, and finger paint.

> *In nursery school and kindergarten, I loved to play with the blocks. I also loved to play house. I liked dressing in dress-up clothes with the boys and girls and playing house.*
>
> *In kindergarten we would get a half hour to play with blocks or the kitchen set.*
>
> *At school I remember having fun with the other students playing with dolls or blocks. We always played cooks or dress up in the toy center in my school. We went there every day at the same time until we reached fourth grade.*
>
> *We were involved in imaginative play. We made up intricate and complicated stories about life, where we were, and what we were doing.*

Six of the respondents recalled engaging in dramatic and imaginative play during recess. The following is an illustration:

> *At school, my friends and I used to play around this huge tree. It had many crevices and holes to store coins in. We'd pretend that the tree was a house and we'd play in it. School was always fun at recess.*

### "I Don't Remember Playing at School": A Response with Qualifications

Fourteen respondents indicated initially that they *had no memory of playing at school.* Frequently they qualified this "lack of memory" by presenting one or more illustrations that indicated that they actually had played in school. Most respondents differentiated among preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school. For example, one respondent stated:

> *I really don't remember play at school except for Head Start.*

The definition of school for this respondent includes preschool education (Head Start) as well as elementary education (K–6).

Some respondents qualified their first report of not playing at school when they elaborated on a simple example of remembered play.

> *I don't remember playing in school. Except for a bubble table in my kindergarten class.*
>
> *I don't really remember playing a lot at school. I mostly read when they let us have free time.*
>
> *I do not remember a lot [about playing in school]. I do remember that the most popular activity was playing teacher because we got to write on the chalkboard.*

In the following two responses, after the initial "I don't remember play at school," both respondents' elaborations referred to the out-of-doors:

> *I don't remember playing much in school, except at recess when we played in the playground.*
>
> *I don't remember indoor play as well as outdoor play.*

In one instance, the respondent connected her not remembering play at school to the fact that teachers can make school work seem like playing:

> *I don't remember if we really did play in school. What I do know is that you don't really need play in school because work is kind of play. I mean, you can make the work so kids feel like they are not working but playing and they actually enjoy school more.*

What factors may have contributed to the initial lack of play memory among these fourteen respondents? Might it be that for many people school and play are contradictory? Or might this kind of response simply be a knee-jerk reaction to a request to write something down? Follow-up interviews with some or all of these fourteen respondents are indicated to help shed more light on what factors may have provoked this response and how the question might subsequently be worded to allow respondents to get past this initial "blocked memory" response.

### Gender

Nineteen respondents reported their memories of play at school as being significantly influenced by issues of gender, either positively or negatively. Sometimes the respondents reported their memories of satisfying participation in single-gender groups. In contrast, some respondents reported chasing after children of the opposite gender or teachers adamantly insisting that reluctant groups of girls and boys play with each other.

### Perceptions of Play as Related to Social Development

The largest number of responses to each question was clustered under various aspects of social development. There were 118 responses to question one (memories of play at home) that indicated memories of play involving other children. Forty respondents mentioned playing with others in response to question two (memories of play at school). Question three (the role of play in learning) elicited eighty-eight responses that described the role of play as helping "children's social development." It became increasingly clear that *social milieu*, both at home and at school, formed a large part of respondent's adult sense of what play was and its impact upon the development of young children. Respondents often saw play as a social rather than an individual activity. The findings related to the perceived relationship between play and social skills were embedded in a variety of ways throughout the responses to each of the three questions.

### Generational Perspectives

In their early childhoods, the 1994 entering freshmen had been immersed in their neighborhoods, schools, playthings, in the cultural expectations prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The views of respondents to the questionnaire reflected changes in child care mores occurring during their childhood years. For example, some respondents mentioned that their moms had other children in their homes every day, indicating that home-based baby sitting and family day care may have taken place in their homes. One respondent crossed out the word *school* in question two (*what are your memories of play in school?*) and another simply broadened the definition of school to include early childhood programs.

Another generation-specific play issue involved toys. During the late '70s and through the middle '80s, the toy industry marketed Cabbage Patch Dolls to parents and children, along with Barbie Dolls and Match Box Cars. Mention of these toys appeared frequently in the questionnaire responses, and respondents remembered siblings, friends, and neighbors as having played with these items.

Since each generation of students experiences differences in the social structures that support child care and education is important to account for these varied experiences in planning programs and college-level courses. The toy industry market has changed rapidly and may exert very different influences on each subsequent generation of children and their play.

## The Relationship between Learning and Play

The responses to question three on the role of play in learning revealed a general sense that play makes an important contribution to children's learning. As was pointed out above, the largest number of respondents (eighty-eight) commented on the relationship between social development and play. However, additional responses to the question (***what do you see as the role of play in children's learning?***) reveal a scattering that, for clarity, has been grouped in the following four categories:

1. responses indicating the belief that children learn "more" through play (48);

2. responses reflecting the idea that play is a means to develop knowledge (12);

3. responses indicating that play contains some elements of formal learning (8);

4. responses reflecting the view that play is an important way for children to learn mastery of their environment (4).

Unlike the more clearly perceived direct link between social skills and play that many respondents saw, the connection between learning and play was not as easily perceived. Respondents in the first category (children learn "more" through play) frequently described play as "fun," as "being interesting," or as "important to learning." The last statement appears without further elaboration. More study is required in order to fine-tune and clarify what respondents specifically meant by their comments. It may be that students did not articulate a linkage because they did not understand what that linkage might be. Instead, they may simply have intuited a close connection between play and learning. Selected responses from the first category above (children learn "more" through play) reflected the students' somewhat naive thinking:

> *I think children learn more by playing.*
>
> *When you are playing with children, they don't always realize that they are being taught something.*
>
> *[Play] makes it much more interesting to learn.*
>
> *You learn more by playing than by sitting and listening.*

In the second category (play develops knowledge), respondents focused more directly on the perceived link between play and cognitive development, still reflected a somewhat diffuse and unsophisticated thinking.

> *[Children] develop everyday knowledge.*
>
> *Role playing as a child helped me gain knowledge of what type of jobs I want to go into today.*
>
> *It helps our minds to develop.*

In the third category (play seen as containing elements of formal learning), responses were somewhat more specific and more thoughtful.

> *It helps [children] to develop important skills.*
>
> *When I explored with my friends, we found out a lot about nature. Children can also discover simple machine workings when playing (the lever seesaw).*
>
> *Through play you learn colors, shapes, numbers, and letters.*

In the fourth and last category (viewing play as a way to gain mastery of the environment), respondents seemed to view the relationship between learning and play as one of discovering and managing oneself within the environment. In the words of two respondents,

> *You learn through discovery and play how to get along in our environment.*
>
> *I think children basically learn, through play, about themselves and about their environment and how to get along within it.*

It appears that respondents learned the important link between play and learning from their own experience. How can we best build upon these understandings and "on-target" intuitions? How can preparation programs help "teachers-in-process" make the needed connections between theory, play research, and concrete, daily play activities?

Language can be developed, refined, and discovered to assist in the process of clarifying and articulating the benefits of play and the negative impact on children who do not have the capacity or the opportunity to play. It is to be hoped that courses such as child and human development, practica, and others devoted specifically to children's play will help students share with others (in writing and verbally) how the connections between theory, research, and actual practice can be clarified and communicated.

## Culture and Play

Among the respondents there were 10 blacks, 4 hispanic and 4 Asian female respondents, and 1 Asian male respondent. Their responses did not indicate any clear differences from the larger group of caucasian respondents. We anticipated that some differences between the responses from members of the dominant culture and from members of other groups would emerge. However, the questionnaire was not sufficiently sensitive to pick up those differences. Although we know that most of the accrued knowledge in the play literature field has been monocultural—that is, Anglo-European—this is certainly an area requiring further inquiry.

## Highlights

Participation in neighborhood outdoor play was recalled by 70 percent of the respondents. To what extent is the importance of outdoor play reflected in teacher preparation programs? For example, where do today's children play? How have neighborhoods changed? How might neighborhoods that provide safe and developmentally appropriate play places and spaces for children be created? How safe is the play environment? While questions will not necessarily be integrated into future questionnaires, the imbedded concepts can be included in preparation programs designed to address the needs of present and future generations.

Responses to question three (play and learning) indicate that only 43 percent of respondents saw a direct relationship between learning and play. Twelve percent recognized a relationship between play and cognition. However, it is still necessary to devise ways to clarify and to make convincing demonstrations of the linkages between learning and play. Play is, indeed, at the core of early childhood education (Bredekamp, 1987) and should be found embedded in the center of early childhood curriculum (Scales, et al., 1993). While play is thought by many to be an important link to learning, respondents identified it with teacher directed activities designed to use play in conjunction with a kind of hidden agenda focused on accomplishing specific teacher goals. If this is the way play is widely understood, it is even more essential to define play with care and specificity. We must move toward beliefs that can be widely shared and broadly accepted within the early childhood profession.

## Directions for Future Study

This study points in at least five directions for productive follow-up research: 1) enhancing understanding of children's play through language; 2) viewing play in the primary and intermediate grade classrooms beyond the recess experience; 3) appreciating the critical impact of culture on children's play; 4) identifying the interfaces between social development and play; and 5) recognizing generational differences in play.

### Enhancing Understanding of Children's Play through Language

Frequently it has been found that teachers have learned about play in diffuse rather than focused, clearly articulated, and thoughtful ways. It appears that teachers may have never had previous exposure to cohesive ways of thinking about or articulating the critical connections between play and learning. The responses to the questionnaire have emphasized this point. In general, respondents seemed convinced of the link between children's play and their learning. However, they frequently could not cogently articulate their thinking in this area. Perhaps what is necessary is a further examination of whether or not students in college programs are provided with sufficient and appropriate exposure to the thinking and language underlying a thoughtful and focused interpretation of the linkages between play and learning.

### Viewing Play in Primary and Intermediate Grade Classrooms beyond the Recess Experience

Many respondents remember play at school as recess. Very little reference was made in survey responses to play within the classrooms, particularly in the primary or intermediate grades. One wonders whether this was a reflection of a culturally held value system that failed to see any relationship between play and learning. As children grow older and move up in the grades, this value becomes increasingly overt.

### The Critical Impact of Culture on Children's Play

This study did not elicit substantial ethnic and cultural differences among groups in memories of childhood play and in ideas about what play actually is. However, a variation in viewpoints would appear to be likely among members of Asian, black, caucasian, hispanic, and other communities. Further research is needed to clarify what experience has shown to be the quite divergent views of play held by members of various ethnic and/or cultural groups. This area for further research is potentially significant, since the study of children's play continues to broaden and to incorporate the "play cultures" of diverse groups. Currently emerging research findings on how children learn and how children's learning and cultural values are enmeshed remain a very rich and significant area for research.

In a discussion at Wheelock College, play experts and researchers suggested that a follow-up focus group discussion might yield different data from the questionnaire responses. It was suggested that individuals frequently respond differently to information in a focus group because issues and problems become clarified and defined through the group process.

## The Interface between Social Development and Play

It was clear from the majority of respondents that a direct relationship between social development and play is widely perceived. The issue for programs and courses is to find ways to best use this factor as a springboard for developing deeper and broader insights into the significance of play in childhood. This is a potentially rich area for further research.

## Generational Differences in Play

As each generation of students brings its own background and experiences to its views of children's play, more exploration becomes necessary to tap emerging insights and resources. For example, how have students experienced violence in their schools, their homes, or their communities? How has this been reflected in their play in these settings? What can be shared and what can be learned? The current work on violence in American culture will shed much needed light in this area.

## Can Children's Play Lead the Way toward Inclusion?

As we continue to gain insights from those we teach, the gaps separating theory, research, and practice can diminish. At the same time, the emerging voices of the constituencies we teach can begin to be heard. We must still remember that there will be times when we may not understand the perceptions or perspectives of others. In such instances, new ways to include these voices in the dialogue must be found. At the very least, articulating our attempt to find ways to understand and include "other" groups and their perspectives about play provides the first step in a necessary and potentially very useful inclusionary process.

# APPENDIX A

## QUESTIONNAIRE

TO: All entering students at Wheelock
FROM: The Wheelock Center for Play

The Wheelock Center for Play is interested in knowing more about the views of play held by entering students. We are very interested in your ideas about children's play. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to any of the questions and your responses to the three questions below will be very useful in our work and much appreciated. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. However, we request that you fill out the basic demographic data below, which does request your name, gender, ethnicity, etc. This information is being requested so that we can have a clear sense of the variety of cultural backgrounds within the group of respondents. You may be invited to participate in follow-up research in the future. We very much appreciate your thoughtful responses to the three questions below and your participation in this research effort.

### *Questionnaire*

Name ________________________________________________

Address ______________________________________________

______________________________________________________

Phone (Day): _______________ Phone (Eve): _______________

Program: A.S. _____ B.S. _____ M.S. _____ C.A.G.S. _____

Ethnicity: ____________________________________________

Female ____________ Male ____________ Age ____________

Program in which you are enrolled: _________________________

Appendix A

1. What are your memories of your own play in your home as you were growing up?

2. What are your memories of your play experience at school?

3. What do you see as the role of play in learning?

# APPENDIX B

## QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

1. *What are your memories of your own play?*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| g) | 118 | Play remembered as involving other children (social activity, neighbors, friends, siblings) |
| f) | 84 | Play remembered as dramatic and imaginative |
| c) | 32 | Play remembered as solitary activity |
| e) | 24 | Play remembered as games with rules |
| d) | 20 | Play remembered as involving adults |
| a) | 8 | Play remembered with formal learning component |
| h) | 4 | Play with imaginary friends |
| b) | 1 | Play remembered with emotional content |

2. *What are your memories of play at school?*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| c) | 59 | large-muscle activities (playground equipment) |
| f) | 49 | dramatic, imaginative play |
| d) | 44 | large-muscle activities that incorporate games with rules |
| k) | 40 | play with other children |
| e) | 31 | recess (which remains undefined by respondent) |
| i) | 26 | teacher-directed activities were accepted as play |
| m) | 19 | gender-defined play (seen either positively or negatively) |
| p) | 12 | does not remember play at school<br>(in one instance) except for Head Start |
| d3) | 9 | play with unstructured materials |
| d1) | 4 | play defined as athletic event |
| d2) | 4 | (board or other sedentary) games with rules |
| l) | 3 | felt self to be "butt" of teasing by other children or left out of play |
| e1) | 2 | negative feeling toward recess (recess still undefined) |
| h) | 2 | disrupted school program in order to play |
| n) | 2 | play seen as containing a formal learning component |
| o) | 2 | leadership/followership an issue in play |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| k1 | 1 | played with teacher |
| h1) | 1 | could only play in school when work completed |
| h2 | 1 | do not recall play in school |
| j) | 1 | solitary play at school |
| j1) | 1 | after third grade, "play was close to nothing" |
| g) | 1 | responded in a way that implies lack of understanding about what play is |

3. *What do you see the role of play in learning?*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| b) | 88 | play helps children's social development |
| c) | 48 | children learn more through play |
| a) | 44 | generalized statement that play is important |
| a1) | 1 | play impacts a child's future |
| m) | 23 | dramatic play (imaginative) |
| f) | 12 | play enhances children's creativity |
| q) | 11 | play develops knowledge |
| n) | 10 | exploratory element of play |
| p) | 9 | play as pleasure |
| j) | 9 | play enhances children's physical development |
| h) | 8 | play as emotional release for children |
| d) | 8 | play seen as containing formal learning component |
| e) | 8 | children gain new insight through interaction with others in play |
| k) | 6 | play as a motivator for children |
| w) | 5 | learn about self |
| o) | 4 | learning to master the environment |
| r) | 3 | play is self-expression |
| t) | 3 | play is child's work |
| l) | 2 | solitary play |
| v) | 2 | self-esteem |
| s) | 2 | important for teachers to observe play |
| g) | 2 | children are not permitted to play |
| u) | 1 | cognitive skills |
| x) | 1 | moral development |
| y) | 1 | leadership |
| z) | 1 | playful environment |

3

# The Meaning of Play: Perspectives from Pacific Oaks College

Mary Beth Lakin
Pacific Oaks College

*"What do we mean by play?" a student asked in our first seminar meeting for HD 499, Play-Based Curriculum Research Seminar. "It seems so vague."*

HD 499 began in 1994 when four faculty members at Pacific Oaks College—Betty Jones, Karen Neubert, Mary Beth Lakin, and Renatta Cooper—decided to design a course to foster conversations among people committed to the healthy development of young children and to develop ways to support children's play as part of Pacific Oaks' work for the Four-College Consortium. Graduate students enrolled in the class were asked to observe and to bring back examples of play at designated centers, and to write about how children began play and carried out various themes and how teachers encouraged, or in some cases discouraged, play themes. One of the responsibilities of the students was to find ways to share their observations with the "observed," acting as "broadcasters" to parents, teachers, children, and administrators in the schools where they collected data.

The research seminar met once a month for three hours. Faculty members asked many of the questions. Looking back on the experience, Karen Neubert wrote recently, "Our discussions on play legitimized the idea of 'play' as being *something*, serious. The students began to 'look' on more levels and to feel freer to verbalize what they were seeing. . . . The playful, creative spirit of the instruction encouraged students to say things they might not otherwise say. We heard many stories about play."

The instructors for the research seminar wanted to get at the students' definitions of play; we tried to do this in a playful, challenging way. Each of us had her own individual interests. Renatta Cooper had been observing bicultural children and how they were often punished for their play styles: Had any of the students in the research seminar observed bias about particular play styles? What did teachers encourage or discourage? Betty Jones connected play with the issue of emergent curriculum: How did children play? How did teachers play? How was the play of adults and children built into the curriculum? Karen Neubert wanted to know everything about play and art: How could children and adults play together with art? How could art become a part of everyday curriculum, visually reflecting the children's stories, fantasies, fears, and playfulness? Mary Beth Lakin brought to the class her interest in observation: How could we more carefully and clearly observe children at play? What did the observations of play tell us about children?

It was hard for the students at times to stay focused on play; some of them meandered into other areas. Was play a serious enough subject to study for a semester? Was play really the most important issue to them? For most students, it became serious enough. Students related the concept of play to issues of bias, development, stress, and creativity. At each meeting, everyone brought her or his detailed observations and questions. One student made an intensive study of an individual child's play and learned more about development through that observation than from any other source of study.

Some concerns related to the teacher's role—what the teacher was or was not doing about play. It was hard to be an observer when a teacher reacted negatively or indifferently to a child's play. How could the student converse with such a teacher? Was it appropriate? If the student was to broadcast the classroom's play activities, what could she say or do about a teacher's stifling actions? In the research seminar students could safely discuss the actions of teachers and possible helpful responses. The discussions often helped students to put the teacher's actions into context.

The research seminar makes play the subject of serious attention and discussion. At the same time, its creative mandate encourages students to see how play makes life joyful and interesting. The following sections describe how the seminar faculty and the college community go about their work of discovering, enjoying, and supporting play.

## Play in the Art Studio

In 1977 artist-in-residence Karen Neubert, created an art studio that gave children a chance to play—to explore, feel, and imagine—with many different kinds of media. Karen's view of play, art, and their connectedness has influenced her approach to the art studio and to her work with children, teachers, and practicum students:

> In the making of art, play is a crucial element. It is the axis or central spark plug or the glue. In the unfolding of an idea, be it in word or in clay or paint, something in the soul is pleased and exhilarated. Through it, we are drawn forward into unfamiliar terrain and exciting sights. In the tedium of work that is required to focus and enlarge this kernel of excitement, we remember the play, the fun of hovering on the brink of the new. We can also enjoy practicing and replaying our ideas, each time refining and honing the form closer and closer to original perception.
>
> Play can be up or down, loose or tight, complicated or simple, with other players or without—but on some level it usually is fun. The kernel of joy is what keeps us going on to the next step.

> So in this sense, play is a sublime and radiant facet of the mind. Children's play may be simple repetition of sounds, or squishing the colors together on paper . . . or it may be tying a shoelace, forming a word, or discovering a 'face' in the scribbles. It is part of that tiny opening in the mind called creativity and higher thinking. It is connected understanding—the playful thoughts jumping from dendrite to dendrite like frogs in our minds.

The art studio expanded into a practicum experience for college students planning to teach young children in a formal educational setting. Students took Karen's course, Children, Painting and Clay, and practiced theory in the art studio with her guidance. Over the years, a pull-out enrichment program developed at the Children's School (given the time constraints on teachers and the effect of separate art space). Karen and Betty Jones established a depth curriculum study group in which teachers and practicum students could talk about curriculum in their classrooms, where curriculum came from, and the impact of children's play on curriculum planning. The repeated questions were these: What's happening in your curriculum? Where did it come from? What are you going to do with it? What are the children really interested in? What will they do with this good idea I have? How can I re-represent the experience? Karen's role was to help teachers and students link nonverbal forms and expressions to verbal ones. How could teachers and practicum students model visual expression appropriately?

When we began the research seminar, participating graduate students were required to attend the curriculum depth study group and to observe and listen to the teachers' ideas. There students could put teachers' actions into context by listening to the reasons why teachers responded to children's play in certain ways.

## Play at the Heart of Emergent Curriculum

In 1989, three Pacific Oaks faculty members—Betty Jones, John Nimmo, and Mary Beth Lakin—team-taught a course on emergent curriculum. Planning and implementing the course provided a model for what we wanted early childhood teachers to do with the play of children in their classrooms: observe and use play themes in curriculum development. At the time, Betty was much more comfortable and skillful than John or I in the role of watching the adult students in the class, finding out what interested them, what they played at, and building these observations into the college course curriculum. Many times John or I wanted to hurry up and decide what we were going to do to add more "structure" to the college course. It was difficult to step back and let the curriculum emerge, to watch the adult students play with their questions and interests, and to use that play in the structure of our course curriculum.

Such curriculum development was consistent with what Betty Jones, Pacific Oaks College's resident scribe, sees as Pacific Oaks's "relatively consistent philosophy throughout its nearly fifty-year history." Pacific Oaks began as a school for children with a strong nursery education/child study philosophy. Another important part of Pacific Oaks's roots was progressive education as articulated by John Dewey. The faculty's development of a philosophy of emergent curriculum grew from the theoretical foundation of progressive education and child study.

At the college, we explore the variety of places from which curriculum emerges. Students and teachers are encouraged to observe children at play and to build curriculum from their observations. In the November 1993 *Curriculum Depth Study Group* newsletter, Betty Jones notes that teachers are often a source of emergent curriculum and the role of play in developing curriculum:

> When adults bring their passions and their playfulness to school, wonderful curriculum emerges. We've seen that some of the events, places, and things that generate adult energy are gardening, cooking and eating, music and dance, stories and drama, rituals and celebrations, clay and paint, being outdoors, communicating with others, and taking action for social justice.

## Play in the Community

Our curriculum, both at the Children's School and the college, concentrates on how people develop and live together throughout their lives. By observing children and adults at work and play and listening to them as they reflect on their lives and learning, we continue to develop our curriculum to meet the needs of children and families. For instance, areas of concentration, such as anti-bias curriculum and development of bicultural children, emerge from our community experience as well as from our knowledge of current trends and social forces. John Nimmo, a member of the Pacific Oaks faculty, has been exploring the theory that "play is a significant context for both developing and revealing a child's sense of community." In a course that John teaches about community, students explore a variety of questions: What is the role of play in acquiring a sense of community belonging? In what ways does a child's play reflect his/her understanding of community? How do children play in their own neighborhood/cultural communities? How does this relate to play in school contexts?

In John's course, the concept of play is analyzed on several levels. Students think about play in their communities; they think about the differences and similarities. They play in the classroom setting—for example, they paint a group mural in order to examine how communities develop.

The faculty members at Pacific Oaks want to understand the developmental tasks of each stage of growth and how to provide an environment conducive to the healthy development of each human being. In planning curriculum, we try to provide a safe and challenging place to play and learn for each child and adult. In classes on theories of human development, we encourage students not only to grasp theory but to play with it. In playing with theory, we see how theorists came about their ideas, how their theories may or may not fit our lives, and how gaps in theory might be filled. This playing with theory also develops into the emergent curriculum of the college classroom, where the ideas and interests of students merge to form a focus, another question to pursue. An observer can see play threading throughout the college curriculum: the research seminar, child painting and clay, emergent curriculum, and community as context.

## The Multiethnic Contexts of Play

In the Children's School and the college, our community has worked diligently to provide an environment that encourages play as a part of the learning experience. We also realize that we have a responsibility as educators outside our immediate environment. In speaking about the definition of play, we must go beyond traditional theoretical and developmental definitions to analyze cultural, political, and economic influences.

Renatta Cooper has examined the paradigm of developmentally appropriate practice, so identified with early childhood education, in the context of multiethnic realities. In the courses she teaches and in faculty discussions about curriculum, Renatta challenges participants to broaden the definitions of play. As early childhood educators, we have tended to examine play from the perspective of "developmentally appropriate practice"; although this philosophy makes some note of cultural differences, it reflects a primarily middle-class, Euro-American point of view. In an informal paper, Renatta reflects on the issues she has observed and analyzed in class discussions and faculty curriculum meetings:

> As I consider the issue of play from a bicultural, multiethnic context, I have been very focused on how parents of different cultures view play. I have felt and expressed that this is a very different perspective from that held by us as members of the ECE Consortium. How professionals, early childhood educators from other cultural groups, view play has been in my thoughts, but not in a prominent place. This all crystalized for me at the recent National Black Child Development Institute National Conference. The issue of play became the center of a roundtable discussion that focused on NAEYC's DAP "Bible" and its relevance to work with black children.
>
> Ours is a culture that does not view play as something that should take place in school. Play is amusing, and an appropriate part of childhood, but it isn't viewed as a critical part of the learning process. Do black children learn through play differently from children of the dominant culture? Probably, given a cultural context in which different things are valued. It seems logical to assume that the play that takes place in that culture would reflect those values. Funny, as a young child I can remember how often I played "school," with my friends, with my dolls, with my younger brother. I was the teacher, I had my students sit at desks and read, or I read to them. It was definitely not a "playful" model. As I look back on it, I received a lot of positive attention for this play, especially in

my efforts to make younger children behave and sit still as part of the "school game."

In all honesty, it doesn't sound much like fun as I reflect on this game. It did, however, accurately reflect the societal and cultural attitudes about play and school. [The game] also ensured that I knew what the expected behavior was within a school context, even though I had never been to preschool. I knew that school was serious; even "play school" was serious.

The serious way in which African Americans view play and school is rooted in our social and historical context in the U.S. It is a context which says to us:

1. You must do ten times better than white people to get the same opportunities they have, and even then you may not.
2. Education is the path away from dangerous, demeaning, and dirty jobs.
3. Parents who are middle class or who have middle-class aspirations for their children must see to it that each generation becomes better educated than the one preceding it.
4. Given the economic and social reality of our people, our children don't have time to play at school.

From my perspective, as a bicultural proponent of developmental education, points 1, 2, and 3 are absolutely true. They do not, however, lead logically to point 4. Yet I don't believe that either side—the "Progressive Developmentalist" and play proponents, and the traditional black "Back to Basic" educators—have proven their point when it comes to educating black children. It will probably take a blend of both philosophies to achieve the best possible educational outcome for black children. The two camps do not have the same type or amount of credibility within the black community.

These are issues that extend beyond the African-American community. Latinos and most Asian immigrant groups tend to select traditional education models over developmental

> ones whenever they have the choice. An exception can be found among some Asian Americans, who may choose a developmental preschool experience before placing their children in a traditional school system. If we really want to discuss play and to have a more play-based curriculum for all children, we need to remain aware that there is a major selling job to do not just to parents but also to educators who do not share this perspective. Is this part of our vision?
>
> I believe that play is an invaluable part of the learning experience. It is where the concrete and abstract are merged for and by the child. It is through engrossing play that we truly learn to think for ourselves, something that can only be learned through an experiential process. Yet how do you measure something that probably should not be measured? How do we convince a skeptical audience of play's importance without a measure?

Continuing discussions at Pacific Oaks College in faculty meetings on curriculum, in depth curriculum meetings with teachers and practicum students, and in college classes force us to ***1) re-examine our definitions of play, 2) consider the language and concepts we use in our discussions about play,*** and ***3) identify and expand the groups with whom we communicate about play.***

In analyzing our definitions of play, the faculty must consider a range of behaviors that we have historically ignored or negated: What are our biases about the many activities that could be called play? How are our play ideas influenced by the communities in which we grow up, live, and work? The language and concepts we use in our discussions about play have been inspired by the roots of progressive education, peace education, and nursery school education, then further nurtured by the philosophies of anti-bias curriculum and emergent curriculum. Karen's continuing examination of art's place in the curriculum has helped us to connect visual expression with play. John's questions about community have pushed faculty and students to think about the language they use in describing play in their communities and the concepts they have about play. Renatta's analysis of play in a multiethnic context challenges us to consider the major selling job we have to do: What do we want to convey about play? To whom do we want to communicate our theories about play? As a faculty, we know the place of play in the early childhood setting in both theory and practice. What is the place of play in elementary, middle school, and high school settings, in therapeutic clinical settings for a child, adult, or family? What theories do we teach in the college classroom? What corresponding practical opportunities do we provide the student getting her credential in special education or her master's degree in marriage, family, and child counseling? Betty steadily reminds the research seminar course that we are broadcasters doing the important work of communicating about play. How do we identify and expand our audiences for our message? As observers, listeners, scribes, and broadcasters, what can we learn from others—teachers, parents, children, and administrators—about play? How do we communicate our ideas to each other?

In the Children's School and the college, we have worked diligently to provide an environment in which play as a part of the learning experience is appreciated and encouraged. We do not always succeed, but we continue to be committed to play in its many forms and facets across cultures. We realize that we have a responsibility as educators toward the world outside our immediate environment. In speaking about the definition of play, we must go beyond traditional theoretical and developmental definitions to analyze cultural, political, and economic influences. As a community, we remain concerned with how to better support play in culturally sensitive and practical ways. In closing, let our seminar students have the final words on the value and place of play in their own and children's lives. Join me in imagining what the next comments in this interchange could be:

> Everything a kid does—math, science, art—if it's exciting and interesting. If it's organized, it's separate from play.
>
> Everything the child generates; if it's imposed, it doesn't always generate play. When does something stop being play?
>
> It must be spontaneous. We have to consider what the child initiates.

If you interview a child, you will find that sometimes play is hard. "Time to go play," a child might sigh.

Everything that comes from my nephew, he calls play.

Do you play?

My favorite things are things I play at . . .

When I forget about others' expectations, about past or future, when I'm puttering, doing something hands-on, feeling free, that's when I am playing.

This still seems so vague to me.

Well, it's making sense of the world, like dramatic play or art.

It's imagination. You're using your imagination when you're playing.

The joy of play is that it is for its own sake. You can push back the boundaries.

For adults, it's a relaxed waste of time.

I'm confused now about the meaning of play. I watch children in my country [Japan] play, and I think I know what it means. Now I am watching play in the U.S., and I am not so sure. I want to compare.

Play is something we think we know what it means. But we all mean different things.

## 4

# Reflections on Play: Learning from Student Teacher Placements

Richard Feldman
Bank Street College of Education

As my colleagues from the Four-College Consortium and I have talked about play as a fundamental area in the preparation of teachers, I keep thinking about the world of children's play that my graduate students experience. What is our task in the early childhood curriculum? Is it to introduce new worlds, to respond to distant interests? Or is it to help children make sense of their own experiences? Is it to support children in becoming expert knowers by offering opportunities for creating, experimenting, and doing with the known or the unknown? Will they sustain their ideas if we are not in their midst, raising questions and attempting to understand how they piece the world together? Our stimulation, interest, and investment in their questions and statements about how it all works are necessary not just to sustain, but to enhance and extend their thinking.

In our effort to develop new teachers who care about learning and play, we encounter many obstacles. School settings should support children playing. Children's play should emerge from direct first-hand experiences rather than from something distant, like television or film. Teachers should help graduate students not just to see but also to participate in the realm of play. As critical as I can be of aspects of each of the classroom vignettes I will describe, I generally find that graduate students, once they have the opportunities to explore these issues, will come to some understanding of the question themselves.

I consider the teachers with whom and the environments in which I place my students as offering good opportunities to learn about children, curriculum, parents, professional staff, and other important issues essential to the preparation of teachers. But not all classroom interactions between teachers and children are positive ones, particularly when it comes to children's play. While each teacher described below is also a person who I am likely to use again as a cooperating teacher, each has challenges in dealing with the role of children's play that are instructive to my students. I hope they are instructive to my readers as well.

None of the cooperating teachers is identified here, nor are their schools. The stories are true, but I have adapted them to insure that no individual may be identified. As I offer you, the reader, an opportunity to view these classrooms, I want you to be aware how difficult I found it to suspend judgment about the quality of interactions that take place in the context of play. As a college faculty member visiting a classroom to support my student in his or her placement, I never believed I could do better than the cooperating teacher. My judgments concern what my student will learn from the setting. The role of the critical eye is something I seek to develop in my students, and therefore, it must exist in me. I seek cooperating teachers who have such critical eyes about themselves and about my students. The context for using the critical eye presumes a trust between the cooperating teacher and faculty member. In choosing to make this internal view public, I write as a sympathetic person who understands what it means to create an effective learning environment for children and what it means to be "on" every moment in the classroom. I have deliberately employed slice-of-life observation. I do not presume to know what occurred before or after my observation. It is not enough to understand the issues of play in the individual classroom; their social context must also be taken into account.

## Outdoor Play—Recess

In a recent discussion with a group of early childhood teachers who came to visit Bank Street School for Children, issues concerning play in school curriculum took on special meaning. The teachers and I were observing children's outdoor play on the deck. The public school teachers observed, "It would be wonderful if our children could have time for these kinds of activities."

It was clear that the visiting teachers liked and saw value in the activities taking place; they noted what children were learning from playing with large hollow blocks, tires, and other large outdoor materials as well as from fantasy playing in spaces less defined and confined by adults. At the same time, they noted that their principal would never allow the children to have so much time "at recess."

If play were defined merely as recess, I too might feel sympathetic to the principal's position. In the public school play yards where these teachers work, there are no materials for play. Both physical and temporal structures are defined by adults and can constrain play. Chase is the only available game, and although it teaches roles and allows for interaction, it is not enough to engage children for long periods of time.

If we conceive of play and outdoor time as *recess*—a "stepping back from work," an "interruption in the ongoing activity . . . a break, an interlude, an intermission, a pause, or a lull"—we will fail to provide children with an essential element of school/life curriculum. *Recess* fails to capture the fact that play is the work of school life for young children. Until teachers, administrators, and others begin using language that conveys the value of play, children will be largely confined to those limited set of activities defined as desirable academic behaviors.

The teacher who made this observation after visiting the play deck is someone with whom I have worked for many years. Her classroom has many wonderful elements. I have joined her and the graduate student when the children played out of doors. She is available for health and safety issues; many children come and seek her out to talk where she sits on the bench.

Should I talk with her about other roles she could play at these times? I know that the graduate student has had many good conversations with her about teaching and learning while they sat on that bench. Should I interrupt these experiences by encouraging my student to instead participate in the children's play? Which activity will the student learn more from? Will my student become the bench sitter of the future, waiting for recess to end so that she can return to her "real work" in the confines of the classroom?

Because I have a relationship with this teacher that extends beyond placing student teachers with her, I can think about the broader context for her behavior. Am I expecting her and her colleagues to take on the principal and try to redesign the context, environment, and attitude toward outside play? Is this a battle that she has a chance to win? Is it perhaps more important for me to work with her about how she interacts with children during classroom play, including block building? To what extent is it my task to teach her how to do something or to motivate her to want to know and explore?

This brings us to the inside of three classrooms I recently visited. My observations there challenged me to better understand how curricula and play are married in meaningful ways for teachers and children. I would like you, the reader, to think about what it is that teachers do to create the environments that promote children's intellectual understanding. I would also like you to think about what teachers do to promote, interact, and become part of young children's social constructs as they attempt to learn about how the human (and particularly the adult) world works.

## Block Building in a First Grade

In the first classroom, several different activities are going on during work time. Some children are making cookies with a student teacher, learning to take turns, to measure, to read the recipe, to select ingredients, and to identify them by name and previous experience. Another group of children is cutting and pasting. This teacher might tell me that this is "small-motor activity." One child has set up to paint; the teacher has told me that any child select painting as an activity and set it up by him- or herself during choice time. Painting for these first graders consists of using tin boxes containing six water-soluble paints. Some children are "using math manipulatives." Some children are finishing writing they began earlier. Another three children are playing with blocks.

It is remarkable to see so many activities taking place simultaneously this early in the school year in a first-grade classroom. The teacher has helped the student teacher to understand the importance of materials being easily available to the children. Everything has been carefully marked to make it accessible, and the teacher has established routines for its use.

I am particularly interested in watching three children in the block area. While highly aware of each other, they are little involved with each other. One child is building an extensive track system that surrounds the entire block area. Another child has assembled three blocks and placed wooden people in the middle of them; a third child is building another and larger building on the farthest edge of the block storage area.

The teacher seldom interacts with this group of individuals except to tell them, when the children are making choices for the various activities, that "Those in blocks will share." After general clean-up, all the children assemble around the block area, so the builders can "share" their work.

Each child reports separately. The boy who has built the train structure talks very little, although the teacher tries to draw him out. He prefers to take his vehicle and roll it around the top, showing how it can go. He says, "This is how it goes."

"Very good," says the teacher, providing a little bit more language about it.

One of the other builders says, "He built a stop at her building."

The teacher replies, "It was his [the first child's] building of a train, and it was his turn to report." After the child shares his building, the teacher reminds the class he has the right to ask if anyone wants to say anything or to ask a question. This is the rule.

The boy understands that he is supposed to call on someone, but he really does not want to leave his train without running again.

"I like your train, it's nice," one child's says.

"How do you [people] get on?" queries another child.

Clearly the builder has not thought about this question, so he decides to show again how he makes the train move further along the track. His sharing done, it is now someone else's turn.

The builder of three blocks does not report on his building until one of the other children says that he built it. He wants to join the train builder in running the railroad, but instead he needs to talk about his building. He takes it apart and puts it back together. He readily understands the ritual of calling on someone to respond or to ask a question. He asks the children he knows to respond.

"What are they doing inside?"

"It's a ball park."

The third child talks about the school she has made and some of its details. She identifies the similarities between her building and the real school they are in. The questions range from the subjective ("I like it") to a suggestion that something could be different about the yard next to the school.

At this point, the teacher reminds the child asking the question, "This was the building of the child who was presenting, and when it is your turn, you can do it that way."

Is the parallel play I have observed the result of the children's stage of development? Or is it a consequence of the reinforced notions of ownership and sharing by individuals, models well-known from writers' and readers' workshops, which this teacher practices very clearly? The children have spent the bulk of the morning in writers' and readers' workshops before coming to this choice time. Is the sharing model, so pervasive in the writers' workshop, equally appropriate to the world of blocks?

In the block clean-up that follows sharing, no other children are allowed to help the builders. There is no system for taking the blocks down. These six year olds are on their own to clean up. The builder of the train does not want to destroy his building and becomes upset when other members of his group take some parts of the track down. He stomps down the rest of his building.

After choice time, everyone needs to complete his or her own clean-up and then to come to the meeting area. The teacher reprimands the block builders for being too noisy and reminds them that they needed to finish cleaning and not to play. I go over to attempt to help them establish some order for clean-up. My hope is that they can survive this activity without attracting too many reprimands. I'm not sure that I won't be sent to time out for disrupting and interfering with the children's responsibility. I try to help them look at the order and think about who can take on different jobs in the clean-up. With a little bit of help, they complete the task and return to the meeting for the next transition.

Although I am somewhat cynical about the teacher's expectations for these children, I am equally aware that she wants them to act on their own. She will spend her own time cleaning up after the children leave, creating order and taking care of the space. I think she doesn't see the ordering task that takes place in the clean-up process with children. I suspect that this teacher would work harder at this process if she saw it as a significant cognitive task. My graduate student can begin to understand the work that children do through seemingly mundane tasks when we talk about what happened in the clean-up. For some of the children, clean-up becomes as much form of play as earlier activities. I can see the continuation of fantasy about the train and track as an opportunity for temporary closure. Adult support of such activities can turn them into productive moments for children. Talking about the train builder with the student teacher is invaluable to me.

## A Week of Building

In a classroom of seven year olds, four children get to spend a week in the block area in a rotation that occurs approximately every six to seven weeks. The children plan to build something from the town in which they live. In some ways, their buildings look like a map of the downtown area with identifiable roadways. The children engage in some of the building together. Two children have decided that they want to build the school, which they place toward the rear of the area. The building is quite different from their own school. At one point, sitting close by, I ask the children who are building, "Which is the front of the building? Where is the playground? The parking lot?"

The children start to think about where they have placed their building. A child from the other side of the block area says, "The children could come in the big playground downtown, they did not need one at the school." Placement, relationships, details, and scale can be explored and represented in the children's model.

The teacher sees me talking with the children and comes closer to listen. Later, she tells me she does not have enough time to spend in the building area. I suggest that the student teacher can try working with this activity to see what kinds of influence she may have on the play. The teacher is less interested in this idea than her own feeling of inadequacy about working with this area of the curriculum. The teacher tells me that she needs some ideas about what to do when she is in the block area. She doesn't know how to talk with the children about their buildings. She likes what they do, but "They don't seem to need me."

Such openings to help teachers further develop their competence occur during almost every visit and observation. Should I cross the boundary and do staff development with the teacher? If I do, how will this affect my student's learning? How much time will it take to engage in such an effort? If I give the time, will I be taking it away from my student? I want my student to have the opportunity to work with the children's block play and to discuss it with me. At the same time, I want to be responsive to the cooperating teacher, who wants to think about the situation as well.

The structures designed and executed by the children almost entirely lack a concept of scale. Much more discussion can take place with the children about their building after they see the actual places during class trips to many of the buildings they built. They need some help thinking about their efforts. Two useful tasks are to help them clarify their own observations and to ask them about the representations created.

The student teacher in this placement wants to talk about the field trip with the children and to explore how it affects their building. She wants to think about her role in supporting such activities. I look forward to the student teacher exploring her role in talking with children involved in building with the teacher and me. Perhaps when she contributes to helping her student, the teacher will enjoy reflecting on her own role and on different ways she may support play.

As I reflect upon this classroom, I am struck by how unusual it is to find a second grade public school classroom in which there are blocks. Although limited by class size and by time, the children still have an entire week every six weeks to work on their ideas about their community and then to "play" with their building, quite unfettered by adult intervention. This is remarkable, and the teacher knows and understands it. In fact, she endorses it by allowing it to happen. As a teacher, she knows that this activity is one of the ways that children communicate ideas. She understands that the replications children make of their experiences are their efforts to communicate what they know and understand. She wants to give herself time to interact with what they create, but fears what may happen to the rest of the class if she allows herself to focus on this activity. Without fully saying it, she acknowledges some lack in her own experience with these materials. She loves language and dramatic play and constructs whole group experiences in which children get to play out roles in the community. However, she doesn't care about the visual, and she has never built with blocks herself. While she understands that the children should have this experience, she doesn't view herself as a user of this medium. She feels the same way about painting and drawing—"I'm not an artist," she says.

As teachers, we want children to have a wide range of experience. A child who says "I'm not an artist" is encouraged to explore the medium. When an adult says something equally limiting, do we accept it or make the same effort to encourage her to expand her range? Is it more appropriate to help this teacher reconstruct her view or to help her see and develop her own strengths?

## A Teacher Joins the Play

The third classroom is a first-second grade in an independent urbān school. The children are studying their city. Two children who are working with each other decide they want to talk about a city with tall buildings other than New York. One child has been to Chicago, so they decide to build Chicago.

As I walk in, sit down, and begin to observe, I can see two boys actively building a very large tower. The teacher is sitting in the block area talking with the children about how tall the Sear's Tower should be. The teacher greets me and says that the children are building downtown Chicago.

The children are very focused on getting the tower right. They have already placed tall antennae on one side and want an antenna on the other side. One child stands back offering instructions to his taller co-builder. He uses motions to support the builder and offers verbal encouragement for his effort to keep the structure upright while adding detail to the building. The builder raises the quadruple block way above his head, perpendicular to the top of the building. It teeters back and forth; he steadies it with a hand and then gingerly withdraws his hand. The other builder, who has taken the role of supervisor-supporter, gets up and motions to help the builder. He holds his hands in the air, as if holding the antenna steady, breathing and sighing as emotionally as if he were building it himself. Then he tells his friend how great it looks. "That's really it; that's just the way it looks!"

He turns to me. "Have you ever been in Chicago?"

I say yes.

"That's how it looks, isn't it?"

I ask him, "Which side is the lake on?"

He looks at it; he moves over next to his partner, and they talk about which way the building faces the lake.

The teacher says she hasn't been in Chicago and is unclear about a lake. The children try to work through their idea of the lake and downtown. One of the children asks if I know the name of the other tower downtown. It is an insurance building, he thinks.

"Met-Life, I think," I say. I don't think so, but there are a number of tall buildings downtown. I tell them I will see if I can find a postcard from my last visit.

I am struck by how the children have incorporated adults into their work, how they understand the potential for resources, how the teacher, instead of directing the building, is instead an interested bystander to be educated by the children. Sometimes they ask for advice, and at other times they may want to know if it is okay to build so high. It is clear that the teacher's goal is to support the two children. By asking an occasional question and simply being present, the teacher encourages this collaborative effort on the part of these two children. One child is preoccupied with precise replication: "You can tell it's Chicago; here's the lake and here's where downtown runs next to the lake"; the other child simply wants to build and to express his ideas through the building process. It is their mutual idea of city: terrain, mapping, and collaboration are important elements in their play with each other.

I cannot stay to watch this venture to the end, but later I get a message from the teacher reminding me to look for the postcard. Support, sustain, understand, enable, participate by being part of and not apart. Reinforce a mutual experience, allow for its sustained creation, acknowledge the work, the interest, and the desire to know.

## Understanding First-Hand Experience

Last, I want to tell you about a very good early childhood setting where I recently had a conversation with its leader. It is a place where there is a great deal of caring about children. Every child is known, and teachers do a good job of working individually with children. It is, however, a school that has activities but no systematic curriculum. The leader tells me that while she knows that Bank Street children *study* the city, her five-to-seven-year-old children *know* the city. They have been all over the city with their parents; "they don't need to talk about something they already know." In this school, there are many projects and activities: Plaster-of-Paris, papier-mâche, manipulatives, sewing, weaving, constructions in which children symbolically represent many abstract ideas. Children develop skills in language; reading abounds. But the richness of group life seems absent: Individuals go off to create varying events with little or no center to hold them together. Group building projects seldom take place; almost all building work is representational.

I worry about placing students in this last setting. Although it has some wonderful teachers, its curriculum lacks the form and substance that make for effective learning. My graduate students get to do all sorts of projects with children there, but I worry that their experience, like a good day camp, is designed merely to keep children busy and happy during the long, hot days of summer. Children's play in the context of a carefully constructed learning environment offers significant opportunities for developing comprehension and understanding of the world. Play, when constrained by a school setting, can be pleasurable but may not expand and extend learning. The value for student teachers of such experiences is in having the chance to engage in play at all, which is so frequently absent from other school settings.

Each of these settings offers my students an opportunity to be in school environments in which some play occurs. As an advisor, part of my role is to help student teachers examine the choices they will have as teachers in a classroom. The first choice is to make play a part of the classroom. Then, as the teacher, they will choose the materials, the space, and the groupings that work best for all.

Play in school is, by definition of the setting, more defined and confined than out-of-school play. Teachers and administrators have a difficult time justifying play for children older than kindergarten—even when some share a common belief [illegible] play is the child's way of learning. Those of us who come from higher education can advocate for children's play by our work with student teachers and our partnerships with cooperating teachers. I hope I will continue to have the opportunity to help my students develop a critical eye for their own practice and a value structure that recognizes the value of play.

## 5

# Constructing Knowledge about Play: Case Method and Teacher Education

Amelia Klein
Wheelock College

Play, an intrinsically motivating activity that characterizes childhood, is one of the most complex behaviors studied by those who work with children. In order to experience success as facilitators of young children's development, child specialists (e.g., parents, teachers, caretakers) must develop an in-depth understanding about the nature and functions of play.

To learn about play, one must become a player; that is, through interaction with others, one must play with and explore new perspectives, concepts, and ideas. Engaging adult learners as cognitive players (creative, analytical thinkers) provides them with opportunities to construct knowledge and dispositions about children's play. This paper will examine play education utilizing a constructivist approach known as the case method.

## Goals of Play Education

Guided by child development theory and principles of developmentally appropriate practice, teacher-educators and early childhood specialists have developed a framework for play education. The framework builds upon and integrates (1) theoretical understandings of play (knowledge), (2) practical applications of play theory (skills), and (3) dispositions toward play and children's learning.

### Theoretical Knowledge

A premise for studying play is that play is valuable. Recent publications on play by leaders in the field of early childhood teacher education have attempted to explain the significance of play. Their work has provided a theoretical framework, an overview, and a certain perspective on the nature and functions of play:

1. play is a medium for learning and development (Bergen, 1988).

2. play "integrates and balances all aspects of human functioning" and helps children develop skills and attitudes they need in order to adapt to future demands (Rogers and Sawyers, 1988).

3. play strengthens children's feelings of personal power and helps them develop a "can-do" attitude (Wassermann, 1990).

4. play provides a context in which teachers can help children develop positive sociopolitical concepts and constructive social skills that may prevent violence (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987; Levin, 1994).

5. play provides a context in which teachers can facilitate behaviors and developmental skills that promote the developmental growth of children with special needs (Linder, 1994).

### Practical Skills

A major goal in teacher education programs is to promote the transformation of ideas (theoretical knowledge) into classroom practice. Play educators have examined the process through which skillful teachers nurture play in early childhood settings. Jones and Reynolds (1992) provide the following examples of supportive roles performed by teachers:

*Stage manager* The teacher contributes to play by structuring and preparing the physical environment to allow for optimal interaction with objects and people.

*Mediator* The teacher sustains play by modeling and engaging children in problem solving and by facilitating positive social interactions.

*Player* The teacher enriches the content of play by briefly participating in child-initiated play episodes and by encouraging children to elaborate on their ideas.

*Scribe* The teacher encourages and helps young children to symbolically represent their ideas and reflect on their play experiences.

*Assessor and communicator* The teacher systematically assesses children's growth and development and communicates that assessment to parents and professionals.

*Planner* The teacher is a co-constructor (together with children), organizer, and critical observer (together with adults) of curriculum.

### Dispositions

As students of early care and education engage in play situations and assume these roles, they gain new knowledge, strengthen their skills, and develop confidence as facilitators of play. These experiences stimulate changes in attitudes or dispositions toward play and the art of teaching. Carter and Curtis (1994) have identified traits that characterize master teachers. Here is a summary of dispositions they attribute to effective teachers:

1. delight in and are curious about children's development
2. value children's play
3. expect continuous change and challenge
4. are willing to take risks and make mistakes
5. provide time for regular reflection and self-examination
6. seek collaboration and peer support
7. are watchdogs and whistle-blowers

Play education provides a foundation for early care and education practice and prepares novice teachers to become primary "players" in early childhood classrooms. Constructivist methods applied to play education provide opportunities for adult learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will make them master teachers.

## Case Method and Play Education

The case method has been advocated as an effective approach to teacher education (Holmes Group, 1986; Kowalski, 1990; Merseth, 1991; Shulman, 1992; Wassermann, 1993, 1994). Case methodology provides a medium for learning that centers on student thinking. The goal of case-based teaching is to facilitate active learning and autonomy (self-governed learning) and to produce a state of cognitive dissonance (Klein, 1989). When confronted with uncertainty or cognitive dissonance during a case study, students engage in a process of applying theoretical knowledge (connecting what they know to new situations), utilizing analytical skills (making meaning of a situation), and creating innovative approaches to resolving problems ( playing with or testing ideas). Case-based learning fosters independent thinking, empowers students as "processors of information," and produces a sense of competence and mastery. Finally, learning by the case method inspires students to reflect on their practice and to develop new perspectives and dispositions.

### The Case

A case is pivotal to case-based teaching and learning. The case must provide ample details, giving richness and depth to a situation and present a problem or situation for analysis and discussion.

> A good case is the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations. It is the anchor on academic flights of speculation. It is the record of complex situations that must be literally pulled apart and put together again before the situations can be understood. It is the target for the expression of attitudes or ways of thinking brought into the classroom. To be all these things, a case must essentially represent a good job of reporting (Lawrence, 1953, p. 215).

A case is a realistic, true account of teaching practice and presents pertinent information involving children, their teachers or other persons, and an early childhood setting. Additional information presented in a case might entail describing the dynamics of a setting or the background information on characters in the case.

A ***written narrative*** (a story being told) is the most common format for a case. Narratives can provide single or multiple perspectives of situations. When an actual situation is described, names and other pieces of information are altered to protect the identity of characters or settings. Other formats for cases are literary works (book), videos, films, dramatizations, or "live" cases (Klein, 1992).

Case questions, an integral part of the case study, are created to stimulate inquiry and analysis. The questions provide an analytical framework for the investigation of issues or ideas central to the case (Kleinfeld, 1992; Wassermann, 1994). Goals for case discussion and analysis vary. The case may be designed to promote theoretical interpretation and analysis, integration of theory into practice, collaborative problem solving, innovative thinking, or a combination of these.

## Case Analysis

Case-based pedagogy fosters group interaction that is initiated when participants in a case discussion react to a dilemma or problem inherent in a case read by the group. A case discussion leader poses questions to facilitate investigation of key issues ("What is this a case of?"). The case method supports the goals of play education. Through the process of case discussion and analysis, students broaden their knowledge about play as they

- interpret information and connect ideas to their knowledge about play
- explore, investigate, and develop new perspectives
- create hypotheses to explain what has been observed
- construct innovative solutions to problems
- experiment with divergent approaches to facilitating play
- reflect on personal experiences and teaching practice
- establish frameworks and principles to guide their practice

Case discussion and analysis prompt students to become decision makers and to apply various roles to facilitate play (e.g., stage manager, mediator, player). During case discussion, students share attitudes and feelings acquired as a result of their play experiences. This exposes them to a wide range of dispositions and may stimulate them to develop new perspectives and greater awareness of what motivates successful teachers. Students can make discoveries about their teaching by comparing their dispositions to those held by master teachers described by Carter and Curtis (1994).

## Case Writing

Case writing has become an integral part of many teacher education programs and has been advocated as a technique to strengthen reflective practice (e.g., Florio-Ruane, 1990; Wassermann, 1993). Engaging students as case writers enhances their professional growth. When students are required to write cases about problems they have encountered in facilitating play with children, they build habits of thinking about their teaching (Wasserman, 1993) and engage in self-governed learning. Through the process of constructing a case, students critically examine their practice and beliefs about play.

By writing cases about dilemmas they face in their work, novice teachers develop skills such as establishing collegial relationships, articulating educational problems precisely, and defining problematic issues and potential solutions. (Richert, 1992, p. 155)

A case is written for "other people" and should be constructed for the purpose of investigation and analysis of a problem. In constructing a case, a writer must focus on the nature of a problem, frame it in a context, and articulate what is known about it. Writing a good case requires that the author go beyond a narrow, personal view and take into consideration the many perspectives and critical variables that contribute to the case. A case writer must engage in objective reporting while keeping track of the major variables inherent in the play situation.

Students are often eager to write cases about their first-hand experiences and to share them with their peers. These experiences are personally meaningful and of great importance to novice teachers because they have a stake in the outcome. Students also discover that they enter a community of learners when their problems are investigated (and resolved) through group case discussion.

### Case Teaching

When students lead a discussion of a case they have written, they broaden their knowledge and understanding of case material. Being a case teacher requires that students (a) deal with information on an abstract level, and (b) delve more deeply into the meaning of the case to develop a clear, objective, and global understanding of issues. During the process of leading a case discussion, students must take into consideration diverse perspectives and interpretations of problems, a process referred to as cognitive flexibility (Spiro, et al., 1988).

A case leader must analyze responses and keep participants focused on major issues. To facilitate adult learning during case discussion, case leaders must allow participants to construct knowledge through inquiry and discovery. A major goal of play education is to provide opportunities for learners to transform knowledge about play. A case leader must be able to guide participants in extending and synthesizing ideas and in exploring relationships between ideas. Students become successful case facilitators as they develop questioning, listening, observing, and communicating skills.

## Developing a Play Case Bank

### Teacher-Written and Student-Written Cases

Experienced teachers, parents, administrators, and professional support staff are valuable sources of information on children's play. By sharing their practical knowledge and professional expertise, adults who work with children can write cases that represent a wide range of perspectives on play. To further enrich the content and context of play cases, professionals and other knowledgeable adults can also provide important information about culture, class, gender, and race as integral components of cases.

Early childhood specialists (including parents) who routinely engage in play experiences with children can portray the complexity of play situations and orient students to the messy world of teaching in cases. Students (case readers) become aware that teaching and problem solving require research, collaboration, and perseverance on the part of the teacher.

Students who have had practical experiences in early childhood settings are potential resources as case writers. Students can describe teaching/learning dilemmas from their developmental perspective as novice teachers and facilitators of play. Cases can also be written by teams of students who have first-hand knowledge of a play situation. Their shared experiences can form the nucleus for a case.

A desire to teach others by sharing personal experiences motivates early childhood specialists to write teaching cases. Other incentives for writing cases might include monetary compensation, professional development (education) credits, or opportunities for publication.

## Videos, Films, and Books as Cases

Although the written narrative is the most prevalent form a case takes, other approaches have been utilized to present information as cases for investigation. Formats such as videos, television documentaries (Klein, 1991), films, and literary works (Tiedt, 1992) can provide detailed descriptions about a real-life situation or highlight issues directly or indirectly related to play. A video presentation, such as a recording of a play episode in an early childhood setting, presents a slice of life depicting a situation with all of its complexities, including environmental factors, body language of the characters, and other details captured in the video.

Using video or other forms of cases as teaching tools presents challenges. For example, students become confused, perhaps overwhelmed, when they attempt to determine what a case consists of. These sources should be carefully selected to reflect the goals of case-based teaching and learning. In using a video, film, or book, the facilitator must have a clear purpose and an understanding of the major issues to be explored. In addition, the case facilitator must carefully guide participants in focusing on significant and relevant information and in making connections between big ideas. These types of cases are more conducive to open-ended rather than situation-specific discussions.

Students and case teachers can also create their own videos and present them for case discussion. Producing a video poses challenges similar to those in writing a case. The producer must present an unbiased account of a situation and record as much information as possible (e.g., focusing on all characters, examining the environment). Because the producer cannot predict what will transpire in the situation to be recorded, goals and issues can be identified only after reviewing the videotape.

## Compiling and Organizing Cases

A play case bank is a collection of teaching cases, such as those previously described, which are designed to promote the investigation of play. Cases that are developed by adults who work together and who have shared experiences are the most powerful and relevant to communities of learners like participants in a teacher-training program, professionals in an early childhood setting, or other groups of adults who seek knowledge about children's play. A rich assortment of teaching cases written by colleagues (including students and parents) supports the goals of play education: development of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes.

Cases that are compiled for education purposes might be classified according to general categories (theoretical interpretations and applications), teacher-specific categories (intervention, facilitation, management), child-specific categories (physically challenged, culturally diverse, gifted), or content-specific categories (violence, literacy). The selection of cases is determined by the goals and needs of a learning community.

Case materials can be developed and organized in a variety of ways.

1. narrative, written cases individually bound, groupings bound together (casebook with an introduction and table of contents);
2. computer-programmed cases (individual or groupings of cases);
3. videos, films as cases, commercial or self-made;
4. videos, films, articles, books as supplementary resources (to be used in conjunction with a case);
5. other resources to enhance case study (e.g., guest speakers, visitation sites).

## Conclusion

Case methodology can be an integral component of play education. Case-based teaching is an interactive, learner-centered approach that reflects developmental and constructivist principles of learning. The case method prepares students to think like professionals, understand the complex nature and functions of play, and become effective teachers of young children.

# Section Two

# Perspectives on Culture and Concepts for the Support of Play

Early in the consortium, members asked hard questions about fondly held assumptions that colored their research and writing on play. In this section, we present articles that grapple with the state of play as a concept from within and across cultures, and the actual state of play in its dense, diverse cultural contexts. Is children's play today sparse, limited, at risk, polluted? Is it in danger of being stamped out by TV, busy schedules, unsafe play yards, and growing up too fast? Is it taking place in places we (as professionals in the field) tend not to see, or are even discouraged from seeing (for good reason)? Is it taking new manifestations we can't understand from our generational perspectives or subject positions?[1] Are we tut-tutting about the loss of the old days while the new ones pass us by? Do we stand in our own way of finding out how to support the new and different ways children play today? Perhaps a little of all of these things is possible, as we give ourselves permission to question and wonder.

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[1] For example, we tended not to see subtle variation in the play of autistic children and could not unlock its meanings until persons with autism helped us to understand better the creative function that seemingly repetitive, unimaginative play has in deciphering, recoding, and mastering the complexities of life (Williams, 1994; Phillips, 1995).

This collection was framed from the consortium's stated intention not only to broaden the conversation from an Anglo-European one (as authors indicated is necessary in Section One) but also to struggle to begin from a more inclusive base. This is a time not only to account for or accommodate minority voices but also to describe and honor differences and sit with them for a while and see where they lead. It can be tempting to return to the good old days, as a recent National Association for the Education of Young Children publication[2] seems to suggest we should do by presenting certain toys as the "right stuff." But the good old days depend on whom they were good for and who is now new and can impose their own tyranny.

The bottom line is that narrow perspectives have broad consequences for children and society. So consortium members struggle productively to shift paradigms. For instance, the paradigm that holds that certain cultures do not value play and/or understand its implications for learning is here shifted to one that incorporates varieties of cultural experience and that finds strengths and limitations across the board. This helps us to understand the subtleties of how play is regarded and supported from within sociocultures. In the older paradigm, certain sociocultural groups are thought not to support play in schools; this is ascribed to their lack of understanding of play's value for learning. An enlarged lens suggests that this perceived lack of support may be due to a critique not of play in schools per se but of poor schooling in which unfocused, under-supported programs do not support children to achieve excellence. This enlarged lens also suggests that, far from valuing play *too little*, parents of children from nondominant sociocultural groups (the same ones said not to value play in schools) value their own children's play *too greatly* to want to see it misinterpreted and deflected in school settings, sometimes with grave consequences. As the Gates anecdote framing this book underscores, for misperceived children, parents may well feel that play can be best protected at home, where it is free of censure, interpretative bias, and reshaping with their sometimes virulent consequences.[3]

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[2] This was sent to all comprehensive members of NAEYC in 1996. It presents a collection of developmentally-appropriate playthings that could almost have been compiled decades ago. For example, it is strikingly devoid of electronics, familiar plastic characters and their endless accessories (famous bulges, turtloid features, pseudo transformations and all). The book seems not to deal with how children sometimes do play in interesting ways with these ubiquitous and much-loved icons and games or with how adults and children can deal intelligently with commercial play seductions (which have always been a huge part of the American experience).

This paradigmatic resketching should not imply that the diverse garden of play is all sanctuary space, however. A critical analysis suggests that for any sociocultural group of children, and for all children today, interesting and safe places to play are only as available as adults make them or as children carve them out despite us (as they have done for generations). It is only by looking in our own backyards, back lots, and back forties that we can see what kind of job we are doing. And the general consensus seems to be that we had better look long and hard nationwide—rural and urban, dominant and minority status, rich and poor, and everywhere in between—at the compromised quality of life for children, of which the quality of play is one measure.

In chapter Six, Diane Levin explores the role of play in development and learning from a constructivist perspective. Using the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky as starting points, she describes the dynamic process by which children use play to deepen their current knowledge and skills, encounter new problems to solve, and then incorporate new masteries into their play. Factors in contemporary society that undermine children's abilities and opportunities to engage in this active play process are then explored with a discussion of possible negative consequences to development and learning. Finally, in light of current threats to play, practical suggestions are made about how to work with children at home and school to promote developmentally appropriate, active play. Levin's work suggests that it is adults' responsibility to come to terms with the deleterious effects of adult choices that are imposed on children's play and to take responsibility for facilitating more opportunities

[3] I am grateful to Lisa Delpit who, while lecturing at Wheelock College in 1995 (and in her books and articles), provided her vivid descriptions of how Alaskan school culture misinterprets the "silence and disinterest" of Athabascan children and their parents' "lack of interest in schooling." At home, in contrast, these children are valued enormously as unique individuals and lead immensely richer lives than are apparent to school people. Delpit stresses that theirs is a culture that asks not, "How much did it weigh?" or "Boy or girl?" about a new baby but rather, "Who came?"

for children to play in relation to the meanings they can construct and to diverse, creative adult models.

In chapter Seven, Renatta Cooper discusses the importance of understanding how racial and ethnic differences impact both development of children and parental and professional perspectives on play. She highlights the role of play and of the media in socialization and the development of bicultural identity inside and outside of the dominant culture. She describes the contradictions that bicultural children live within as they are both excluded from and expected to be socialized into the dominant culture. For example, she highlights the experience of youngsters who model the swagger and verbal skill of popular young television characters, are naturally admired by peers, and then find that their behavior (particularly if they are youth of color) tends to be misunderstood, censured, and punished by teachers, sometimes with severe consequences.

Cooper also offers a discussion of structured observations her students have undertaken of bicultural children. Again and again, these highlight how often these children are misconstrued, blamed, and labeled incompetent, troubled, or bad, when in fact a close observer sees something very different. Cooper also describes how cultural values are transmitted by play and can make play behavior misunderstood by those not using the same cultural lens. For example, she mentions the tendency to see active forms of play among both boys and girls as characteristic of undesirable aggression instead of as a way to learn to be assertive and take care of oneself within challenging, dangerous contexts.

Cooper sees a role for teachers in educating parents about the importance of play and the role of media in socialization. At the same time, she feels it is necessary for teachers to do a highly competent job of planning and modeling curriculum that demonstrates how play is useful—a "selling job" particularly necessary for parents who are suspicious about anything that could reduce their child's competitiveness in the job market and who have already heard weak, unsubstantial arguments about the value of play.

Meier and Murrell take up the thread of lenses through which we view so-called aggressive play and how they influence the meanings we ascribe to play. In chapter Eight, they examine the importance of cultural analysis in contemporary approaches to human development and children's play in particular. Drawing on a framework that focuses on a deep, culturally contextual analysis of the meaning of children's play, they expose the cultural myopia in contemporary analyses of children's play. On this account, they examine how this myopia can frequently lead to inaccurate and unwarranted generalizations regarding play and development among children belonging to diverse sociocultural groups in the United States. They argue, for example, that play analysis of working-class children of color misinterprets the meaning of play with so-called action figures when it focuses primarily on the manifest symbols and enactments of aggression, and that it pays insufficient attention to understanding how children understand the objects as symbols and how they use these symbols in their "meaning making" with other children. They close with a discussion of culturally responsive theory for more careful and critical analysis of play.

# Endangered Play, Endangered Development: A Constructivist View of the Role of Play in Development and Learning

Diane E. Levin
Wheelock College

There are a growing number of voices expressing concern that childhood play is being seriously undermined. A variety of factors—parents, teachers, educational policies, media, toys—are often mentioned in discussions about the reasons why play is in jeopardy. Play time is being shortchanged at many schools as more emphasis is placed on teaching "the basics" at younger and younger ages (Elkind, 1987; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Klugman and Smilansky, 1990). Many children have busier lives than in the past, so they have less free time to engage in rich and meaningful play (Elkind, 1988). Instead of playing when they do have free time, children are often watching TV—an average of four hours a day—not to mention time spent watching videotapes or playing video games

(Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 1994). And then, even when they do play, highly realistic, media-linked toys often channel children into imitating the TV shows they have seen rather than into developing their own creative and imaginative play (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987, 1990; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 1995).

Why are so many educators and researchers expressing concern about the changes they see in childhood play? What are the implications for children if, in fact, they do not engage in constructive, rich, and creative play? What are the possible effects on children's overall growth and development when their play is undermined? Central to answering these questions is understanding play—what it is and the functions it serves in promoting healthy development and learning.

While there is widespread consensus about the importance of play in the early years, a debate still continues over what constitutes an adequate definition of play and how play contributes to development and learning (Hughes, 1995; Klugman and Fasoli, 1995). Where one fits within the debate and the degree of importance one places on the role of play in the early years are generally tied to the underlying assumptions one makes about how children develop and learn.

## A Constructivist Approach

Many of those who argue most strongly for the importance of play in the early years are those who adhere to a constructivist view. A constructivist view has at its roots cognitive-developmental or developmental-interactionist theory (Athey, 1988; Berk, 1994; DeVries and Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972; Piaget, 1973; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). This position argues that children build knowledge and skill through a slow and continuous process of construction. Children do not passively take in information from the world around them and learn it; rather, they actively transform it into something that is unique and personally meaningful. They use their experience as the content for building new meanings and skills onto what they have already learned. Through this process of interaction between individuals and the environment, increasingly sophisticated and meaningful understandings and skills develop.

From a constructivist perspective, play is a vital part of the whole process of constructing knowledge (for example, see Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987, 1990; DeVries and Kohlberg, 1987; Forman and Kuschner, 1977; Kamii and Devries, 1978; Piaget, 1951; Smilansky, 1968; Wassermann, 1990). Using this perspective, this paper examines how play is an integral part of the learning process. It also speculates about how and why, when children do not have adequate opportunities to play or do not develop adequate tools for play, there is cause for serious concern.

## Looking at Play with a Constructivist Lens

- Tanaka, a kindergartner, is painting at a table. She is carefully dipping her paint brush into a color and then stroking it onto her paper. She is having an ongoing monologue with herself that documents what she is doing—e.g., "I made a yellow line there." She makes several paintings, beginning each with a vertical line drawn down the center of the page, then adding more vertical and horizontal lines until the paper is divided into many smaller sections. The length, direction, color, and placement of each line are made very carefully, and the resulting configurations of boxes vary from picture to picture. In the fourth painting, a drop of paint inadvertently lands in the center of a box. Tanaka stops abruptly, stares at the drip with a worried look, then smiles and proceeds to make dot patterns within several other boxes. In her fifth painting, after she has filled the paper with boxes, she immediately begins to add dots to the boxes in still other patterns. At this point, Tanaka exclaims, "There!" She stands up and looks at her five-painting series and then goes to get help to hang her pictures up to dry (*See Figures 1 and 2, p. 76*).

- Mario, who recently had his fourth birthday party, watches his father prepare food and then feed his baby sister. He leaves the room and quickly returns with his doll. Mario looks at his father, then cups his left hand, scoops his right hand into it, and offers some pretend food to his doll. After a few scoops, Mario picks up the doll and goes into his playroom. He sets the doll on the floor and begins to stack some large cardboard building blocks in a way that resembles a tall chair, then puts his doll in it. He builds a second chair, onto which he places his teddy bear. Mario gets a can of playdough and carefully

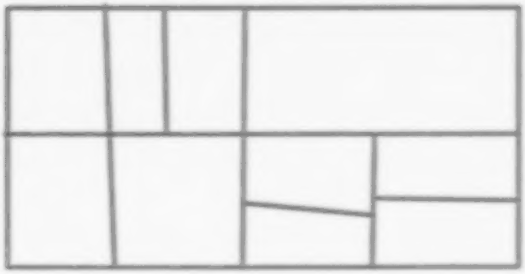

*Figure 1.*
*Tanaka's First Painting*

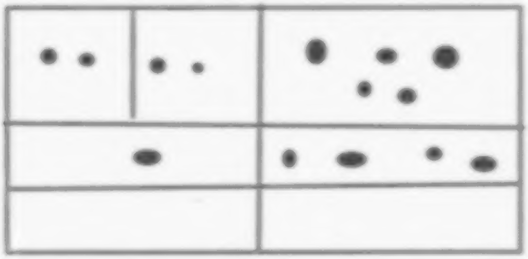

*Figure 2.*
*Tanaka's Fifth Painting*

pulls out some pieces, putting unequal amounts on plates he has put in front of the doll and teddy bear. He pauses, staring at the plates, then shifts the amounts of dough until both piles appear to be about the same. Next, he takes out the rest of the playdough and carefully breaks it into four pieces, holding them next to the bear's and doll's pieces. He keeps moving little bits of playdough from one chunk to another. When all the chunks seem about the same, he carefully scans them all and sighs. He reaches for some crayons from a can, sticks one into each chunk of playdough, and starts to sing: "Happy Birthday to you . . ." (Adapted from Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990, pp. 21–22).

- At almost eleven years old, Ray loves to draw. He always has a sketch pad handy to use in his spare time. Recently, he has

> become very interested in drawing comic book superheroes, especially muscular X-Men characters. He has made a lot of progress drawing endless, muscle-bound figures. Then he gets a book on how to draw bodies and muscles for his birthday. He becomes fascinated and immediately tries to draw bodies with accurate muscles, commenting that he "never realized just making bodies look like they have muscles isn't enough . . . you need to learn how to draw real muscles that look and work right!" After about a week of focused effort making endless, very stiff drawings of the various body parts with accurately drawn muscles, he returns to drawing his X-Men action figures. They are quite transformed from the ones he was drawing before he had the week's diversion with his new book. He repeats this sequence again a few weeks later, when he returns to the new book and spends several days working on how to draw realistic facial features—eyes, mouths, noses.

These three children are constructing knowledge as they engage in a rich and creative play process. They are using something they find interesting about what they already know in unique and creative play. But as they play and try things out through repetition and then variation, they encounter (assimilate) something new or unexpected, a new problem or challenge. The new information or situation does not quite fit into what they already know. They experience confusion (disequilibrium.) They try to figure out or master the new content by adjusting (accommodating) their current ideas to the new content. They learn something new and thereby reach a new level of comfort (equilibrium). Once this happens, they immediately try out their new mastery in their play until yet another challenge is encountered.

Figure 3, "The Play Process as an Integral Part of Learning and Development," (p. 78) provides a highly schematized summary of this process. The play evolves through several steps:

1. playing with what is already mastered or known,

2. encountering an interesting problem to solve as one plays,

3. solving or mastering the problem in the play,

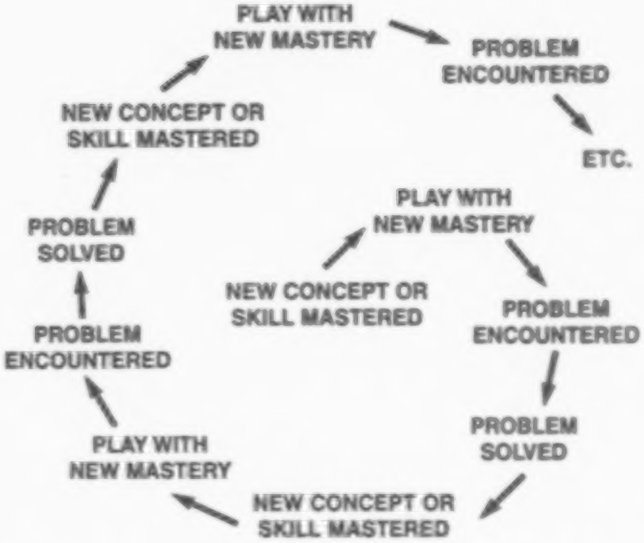
NEW CONCEPT OR SKILL MASTERED
PLAY WITH NEW MASTERY
PROBLEM ENCOUNTERED
PROBLEM SOLVED
NEW CONCEPT OR SKILL MASTERED
PLAY WITH NEW MASTERY
PROBLEM ENCOUNTERED
PROBLEM SOLVED
NEW CONCEPT OR SKILL MASTERED
PLAY WITH NEW MASTERY
PROBLEM ENCOUNTERED
ETC.

*Figure 3.*
*The Play Process as an Integral Part*
*of Learning and Development*

4. having a new concept or skill to work on in play,

5. playing with what has been learned or mastered.

We can think of this spiraling progression as both a motivator and cause for development. The children's play gradually evolves and advances as new masteries and understandings build onto what came before. The process seems to remain endlessly interesting and self-motivating: first children feel the power of knowing how to do something interesting, then experience the challenge of figuring out something new, and then get the new power that comes from having something new to try out. Furthermore, the distinction between work and play often seems to blur as children move back and forth between having fun as they use what they know and hard work as they struggle to figure out a new challenge.

This illustrates the developmental processes described by both Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget (1951, 1955) saw the process of assimilation (taking in information and using it for one's own pleasure, without adapting one's thinking to it) and accommodation (adapting one's current thinking or schema to take new information into account) as basic to all aspects of developmental and learning. The role of the environment in promoting development was to provide an "optimal mismatch" (optimal amount of disequilibrium) between what children already knew and more advanced knowledge. Play was one of the central mechanisms by which children experienced this. Vygotsky (Berk, 1994) also saw play as central to children's development. Development advances along a "scaffolding" in which the role of the environment is to provide children with experiences a little bit higher up the scaffolding (the "zone of proximal development"). Play provides children with a vital opportunity to experience and work in this zone.

### How Tanaka, Mario, and Ray Construct Knowledge through Play

Using this constructivist framework to look at these three children's play reveals that all three are highly engaged in original and personally meaningful play:

☐ In her play, Tanaka is interested in systematically dividing up her paper into sections with a series of parallel and perpendicular lines. To do this she uses prior knowledge about such things as how to apply individual colors and make straight lines with a paint brush and how to attach words to actions. She explores her play interest over several pictures, slightly varying where she places the lines and the patterns they make with each new drawing. She is learning about organizing and divide up two-dimensional space with perpendicular straight lines (a vital part of learning both math and reading), when she experiences a problem (disequilibrium)—an unexpected drip suddenly intrudes on her fifth painting. For her play with lines to continue, she is forced to figure out (accommodate to) something new. She does this by switching her focus to what can go inside the boxes; and finds a new way to work on filling in space:

dots. She now begins to "play" with this new discovery, to try out and vary it. The new thing she is "working" on—applying dots to fill in two-dimensional spaces—builds on what came before—i.e., lines—thereby furthering her understanding of how to organize two-dimensional space.

☐ As the focus of his play, Mario brings in content that is central to his recent social world—his father feeding his baby sister and his recent birthday party. He uses many aspects of his prior knowledge and skill to recreate his birthday party through dramatic play: what he knows about imitation to feed his sister as his father did, symbolization to make crayons stand for candles and playdough stand for cake, and representation to put blocks together to make chairs. In the course of his play, he decides to give the two stuffed animal participants "cake." But as he does this, an interesting problem (disequilibrium) seems to arise: The animals have different amounts of cake. Mario gets so interested in trying to equalize the playdough that he uses all the rest of it to try to work out exactly how to make each portion "equal." In fact, the issue of how much cake each child could have had caused some stress at his real party. Only when he is satisfied that he has mastered this challenge by creating two equal pieces (reached equilibrium) can the party resume. In the course of dealing with the cake distribution problem, Mario has accomplished a lot in his play—for instance, he has worked on his cognitive understanding of quantity and equivalence and his social understanding of fairness and nurturance.

☐ Ray, while quite a bit older than the other children, is still using play in the service of his development. He loves to draw and has been working intently on how to draw muscular comic book characters. He has recently learned how to draw figures that "looked" very muscular, which he seems to be quite happy about (in equilibrium), when he gets a book that gives him a lot of new information about the reality of muscles. He experiences disequilibrium when he realizes that just making them "look right" does not

> make them "right." He has a new challenge: learning how to draw muscles that actually match what muscles in the body are "really" like. He works very hard at mastering this. Once he does, he has accommodated his drawing to this new learning. Then, as he uses or "plays" with his new skill and experiences the power of his success, he finds a new challenge: "the faces just don't look good enough anymore"—and the whole process begins again.

As we look at these children's play, we can see that all three control what happens and use what they know in their own unique ways—they are the players/actors, script writers, producers, prop people. No one else could go through the process of mastering similar skills in quite the same way. And as they play, they are learning specific attitudes, values, and skills for actively working out what they know and for building new meanings through play. They seem to have attained a certain level of ease and comfort, using their play to do this. In the process, they are experiencing the sense of competence and power that can come from using what they know to control their environment and to master new ideas and skills. In sum, they are using their play to further their learning and development. And we might even conjecture that they would probably not have become as skillful at the tasks and concepts they are working on without this rich play process.

## Implications for Development and Learning

As an integral part of the knowledge construction process, play is a mechanism of vital importance across all areas and levels of development, not just in the early years. For instance, we see it as children master new physical skills. A baby who has just figured out how to stand up tries it out over and over again, first with great intensity and seriousness as she tries out the new skill, then gradually with playfulness, and often even with humor and delight as she tries putting more weight on first one foot and then the other, or accidentally lets go of the supporting chair and wobbles a bit before she reclaims the chair and her balance. We see it in humor, really another form of play, where jokes and laughter generally focus on playing with and varying what has recently been mastered—as when a baby who has just learned the labels "dog" and "cat" plays with that knowledge by pointing to a cat, saying "dog," and then laughing in glee.

Often, the most intense play themes in which children engage at particular ages and stages involve the key areas or issues that need to be mastered at that particular level of development. Two year olds will initiate endless variations on the game of peek-a-boo, which provides an avenue for them to expand and deepen their understanding of object permanence. Eight year olds, after they have mastered the reading process, often love playing with wide varieties of secret codes; these help them use, vary, and extend their understanding of symbols and signs as means of communication. Also at this age, children often become involved in collecting—for instance, sports cards or stamps—and endlessly sorting their collections into increasingly complex categories; not surprising, this interest comes soon after the children have reached the stage of concrete operations, at which they have become capable of logically categorizing by multiple attributes.

But in addition to age and stage issues, individual children bring their own styles, family culture, prior knowledge and experience, and current needs and interests into their play. These will play a crucial role in determining what they play and how they play it at any given time. So in order to support a rich play process for individual children, we have to take these individual differences into account.

Finally, the more opportunities an individual has to bring what has been mastered into a rich and meaningful play process—to try it out and see how it works in a variety of situations and circumstances—the more fully and deeply that knowledge is likely to become integrated into what is already known, the more competent the individual will be in using it, and the more likely it will be to further development and learning.

## All That Looks Like Play Isn't Play

While a constructivist lens can help us identify and appreciate play, it can also help us identify the many activities frequently labeled "play" that are not. That is, by looking at whether a child is involved in a dynamic process of constructing knowledge *or* simply mimicking what has been seen or following a highly prescribed path, it is possible to figure out whether or not an activity is constructive play.

> Jay, a four year old, grabs a small toy knife and sticks it many times into an action figure from the "He-Man—Masters of the Universe" TV show. He says, "You're dead, you're dead." He throws the doll away, saying, "I got you. You're crushed . . . You're dead." He pulls out another figure and repeats the sticking action with the knife. He stomps on the two "dead" figures, then picks up a "Transformer" [a toy connected to the "Transformer" TV cartoon program], and carefully changes it from a tank into a robot. He attaches a gun to one hand and a big fist to the other. He runs over to the two "dead" characters and goes "POW, POW! Now, you're really dead. I killed you. I'm He-Man" (Adapted from Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987, pp. 37–38).

Jay is engaging in an activity that many might call "play." But there are significant differences between this scenario and the three earlier ones that call this conclusion into question. Jay seems to be imitating what he has seen on television. He is repeating similar violent actions over and over—his version of what He-Man does. He is using his toys and props in limited and repetitive ways that seem to be determined by how the toys look. He brings only the most salient aspects of the TV show and little content from his direct experience into the play. There also is very little change and development of his activity over time. There is little evidence of the knowledge construction process described in Mario, Ray, and Tanaka's play.

Looked at in this way, Jay is really involved in what Piaget and Inhelder (1969) called imitation—i.e., letting external circumstances take over as he adapts (accommodates) his actions to correspond to the demands and models of the outside world rather than actively using his own experience to construct personally meaningful knowledge. There is little observable evidence that he experiences disequilibrium or tries to master something a little more advanced than what he already knows—"optimal mismatch" or "zone of proximal development." As a result, Jay is getting few of the benefits that constructive play provides but instead seems to be learning how to imitate the violence he has seen on TV.

This same method of analysis can lead us to other activities that are frequently labeled "play" but that rarely are. Using coloring books and coloring in worksheets involves staying within someone else's lines rather than creating one's own. Playing with Barbie dolls usually involves dressing them for roles defined by the designer of the outfits (e.g., Safari Barbie) and then undressing them, rather than developing roles and play scenarios from meaningful personal experience. Similarly, playing video games often requires shaping oneself to what the game creator intended, not coming up with original ideas or bringing in personally meaningful content.

It is important to look at what a child is doing with a given material or activity before deciding if it is primarily play or imitation. There will be times when children doing one of the above activities are, in fact, engaged in constructive play. What if Ray, the child from the earlier scenario who loved to draw X-Men, decided to cut out all the eyes from characters in a coloring book, glue them on pages of his sketch book, and then draw his own X-Men faces to go with the eyes? Here he would be involved in a constructive play process—transforming the coloring book into something of his own making, in the service of his own interests and learning.

## Undermining Play Undermines Learning[1]

When children are involved in play that meets the criteria spelled out earlier, endless opportunities arise for them to further their social, cognitive, and emotional development in an integrated and holistic manner. If children do not become deeply involved in such meaningful play processes, do not develop the tools necessary to engage in constructive play, do not have opportunities to engage in play as an integral part of all their masteries and learnings, or do not have rich and meaningful content from direct experience to bring to their play, then there are serious implications for all aspects of their development and learning.

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[1] This section is adapted from D. E. Levin, "Media, culture, and the undermining of play in the United States." In E. Klugman, ed. *Play, policy and practice* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1995), pp. 175–184.

### Undermining of Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Basic Intellectual Skills.

Without rich and meaningful play, the whole process of actively transforming experience into meaningful cognitive knowledge can suffer. Children are denied a central vehicle for experimenting with new ideas, developing skills, building new ideas onto what is already known, and generalizing from what is known to new and varied situations.

Children are also put at a disadvantage in developing the tools they will need for later learning. From a constructivist perspective, the very skills children learn to use as they play are necessary prerequisites for successfully mastering academic content. For instance, high-quality play requires children to find personally interesting content to work on—new masteries to exercise, new problems or questions to try to figure out. As children persist in problem solving, their creativity, imagination, and cognitive knowledge are all utilized and enhanced. They experience a sense of empowerment that comes from seeing how what they know can affect their world and from achieving a new level of understanding. As children repeatedly experience this mastery process in their play, they develop a deep sense of themselves as capable and competent problem finders and problem solvers—as competent learners. They also become increasingly adept at solving actual problems and develop skills that can be transferred subsequently to other situations.

Current trends in early childhood curriculum development assume that children can actively construct knowledge—for instance, literacy is taught in a print-rich environment where children find meaningful problems about the literacy process to engage in deeply. This process assumes that children are problem finders and problem solvers, see problem solving as enjoyable and satisfying, and view themselves as capable and competent "problem solvers." Children learn to do this kind of process in play (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992; Wassermann, 1990).

Imitation like Jay's He-Man and Transformer "play" does not provide children with the opportunities they need to develop this foundation for intellectual and academic growth. Instead, they mimic someone else's ideas and do not transform them into something that has personal meaning and intellectual power.

From a constructivist perspective, the social trend toward devaluing play may be occurring because when children have time for play, what parents and teachers are really seeing is imitative and rote behavior, not play. If this is so, adults may be less motivated to provide time for play and instead focus children's efforts on more direct methods of teaching—i.e., prescribed and rote activities.

### Undermining of Social Development and the Acquisition of Interpersonal Skills.

Meaningful play is vital to healthy social development (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992; Levin, 1994). As we saw in his pretend birthday party, Mario replays an important social event with his doll and bear using what he already knows to build meaningful social knowledge about nurturance and fairness. Play with other children can be especially important as a vehicle for trying out what is already known about such skills as give-and-take and perspective taking and than adapting them to the demands and needs of playmates.

If play is undermined and children have fewer opportunities to interact with one another in meaningful play, the potential effects on the development of their social understandings and skills are very worrisome. Children who use their shrinking play time at home and school to imitate the actions of television characters (like the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers), as Jay does, are following someone else's script about how to treat others. Their interactions with one another and with toys can become prescribed and rote. In such a situation, they are not engaging in the active construction of social knowledge necessary to develop a broad repertoire of increasingly advanced social understandings and skills.

In addition, the violent content children often imitate represents a very narrow range of the possible social behaviors they should be trying out and incorporating into their repertoire of socially responsive and responsible behavior. Conflicts are initiated and resolved in their TV-derived scenarios by fighting; any act of aggression, no matter how heinous, is justified for the "good guys." As children make imitating violence a central feature of their play with one another, they cannot help but incorporate aggressive behavior into their developing social repertoire. The narrow and highly stereotyped ideas that children bring to their imitative play about people presented in TV programs—especially those about gender and race—promote learning stereotypes and narrow children's opportunities to develop to their full potential.

### Undermining of Emotional Development

Rich and meaningful play provides Ray, Tanaka, and Mario with safe arenas for working on novel, exciting, puzzling, or disturbing content. As they do this, many of their basic emotional needs are being met—they experience trust, autonomy, mastery, power, and competence. Such opportunities are a vital part of developing feelings of well-being and positive self-esteem.

Children's emotional development is jeopardized when they are deprived of meaningful opportunities to experience the personal power and satisfaction that can come from creating play that resonates deeply with who they are and what they need. In such situations, all aspects of development can be jeopardized. Children may fail to develop the necessary confidence in try to construct new meanings or to rely on their own skills and resources to negotiate their world. Such children may begin to look outside themselves for satisfactions—to media, toys, and peers. In the extreme, this process may develop into an antecedent of addictive behavior—the need to look to the outside for an external quick fix to achieve a fleeting sense of well-being—as a substitute for not learning how to find satisfaction from within.

### Implications for Education

Understanding more fully how play contributes to all aspects of healthy development and learning lends strong support to current concerns about the dangers children face when they do not engage in healthy play. It sheds light on how the many factors mentioned as negatively influencing children's play may actually contribute to its demise—for instance, how single-purpose, TV-linked toys often take the control of play away from children and channel them into imitating what they have seen on TV. It also points to the specific ways children's development and learning can suffer when their play is undermined.

On a more positive note, a constructivist view of play provides us with powerful tools for promoting constructive play. It creates a strong argument for advocating play as the center of the early childhood curriculum and for incorporating the study of play into early childhood teacher education programs.

Finally, a constructivist lens can inform our efforts to promote healthy play in all children. More specifically, it points to several approaches:

- planning many opportunities for children to use play as an integral part of the concepts and skills that are being taught;
- minimizing activities that teach skills and concepts in isolation or by rote because both cut off avenues for bringing content into play, where it can be fully mastered;
- avoiding dichotomies between work and play so that children are encouraged to use play to construct meaning from what is taught;
- giving special help to those children who seem to have the hardest time engaging in rich and personally meaningful play;
- learning to identify the specific content and problems individual children are working on in their play and then working to facilitate and extend their involvement both in and out of play;
- designing play opportunities with the specific interests of individual children in mind;
- planning activities that capitalize on the deep, age-specific developmental needs and interests of a group of children.

# 7

# The Role of Play in the Accultural Process

Renatta M. Cooper.
Pacific Oaks College

Play is perhaps the dominant active socializing agent for children. Since the publication and acceptance of the socioemotional developmental process described by Erik Erikson in *Childhood and Society,* we have come to accept the role of play in preparation for an adult social role. However, while this preparation was once fairly limited to what children saw first hand in the world around them, this play is now heavily influenced, some might say completely controled, by media-defined images. For children who are not of the dominant culture,[1] the images of themselves that they see reflected in the media help to define who they are in the larger social context. It is through the media that images of beauty and attractiveness are received in strong and forceful ways. From watching, children discover who's cool, smart, pretty, and popular. Reflections of these values are often presented in their school experience by the other children and adults in their world, who are also acting out the script.

## Identity Development

There is a social competency dimension to identity development. Once children begin to interact in the social world beyond that of the family, their sense of self begins a gradual redefinition that accelerates in adolescence. It bears mentioning that with more than 50 percent of mothers of children under three employed outside the home (1990 U.S. Census), the bulk of their socialization is taking place in the world of child care and not necessarily in the world of their family and/or culture. In this context, everything needs to be done to counter the media and their impressions.

It is believed that the average white child spends 20.8 hours a week watching television, hispanic or latino children spend an average of 22.6 hours, and African-American children spend an average of 27.6 hours "plugged in" (Reddy, *Statistical record of hispanic Americans*, 1993). Latino children's viewing habits vary greatly based on whether theirs are primarily English- or Spanish-speaking families. According to a 1993 Nielsen report, 50 percent of hispanic adults speak only Spanish or mostly Spanish in the home. Since adults tend to control the television in these families, the children in the household are primarily watching programming that originates in Mexico. In addition, "Since Hispanic households generally contain a larger number of people, this increases the chance for a set to be in use, without increasing the likelihood that any single individual in the household will be watching" (Nielsen, *Television Audience*, 1993, p. 87).[2] This may turn out to be a bad thing for advertisers and a good thing for these children. Unless, of course, there exists a "second set" that is ceded to the children. On such a set, the children will watch programming directed at them and will be unmonitored by adults. This leads to totally unsupervised viewing, which, from an educational perspective, is the worst kind of television viewing for children. What they see must be filtered by their parents' reactions and comments if the images are to be challenged at all.

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[1] *Culture* is defined here as a shared collection of rules of behavior, symbolic forms, and traditions. *Culture* includes all the rules of behavior for appropriate behavior that are learned by people as a result of being members of the same group or community (Saville-Troike, *A guide to culture in the classroom*). *Acculturation* is defined here as the learning of the ideas, values, conventions, and behavior that characterizes a cultural group. In nondemocratic cultural contexts, this includes learning the status of your group within the dominant societal context (Cooper, 1993).

For children, interactions with the media are widely reflected in their play. Cartoon characters and familiar story lines dictate a great deal of the active imaginative play that occurs among children of all ages. The programs, movies, and videos form common bonds, common metaphors for childhood experience in the U.S. and well beyond. Children may be new and unfamiliar to each other, but in play they find common ground, and today those bonds are being formed through market-driven, product-oriented programming.

But what if who you are isn't visible on the program or in film? What if the image you see is counter to the one you see projected at home? What if a peer tells you your response is wrong—"He doesn't really talk like that!" For example, boys begin to get attention and a degree of tolerance for displaying certain verbal skills and adopt swaggers that are frequently evident in young attractive males on television programs. *They* invariably do "bad" things, get in a great deal of trouble, and charm their way out of all sorts of problems in twenty-two minutes (the actual running time of most thirty-minute programs). The consequences of their behavior? Well, they are virtually nonexistent in the TV world. No problem is ever too big to be solved, no damage is lasting, and all is forgiven at the end of the show. Real life is rarely if ever this way, especially for boys of color.

What if the behavior you observe as being so effective on television doesn't work for you in real life? School-aged children may find both parents and teachers put off by certain types of media-defined culture, so whom do you try to please? Why, your peers, of course! At issue here is that while children, because of the common socializer of the media and other social experiences, may be reasonably sure about what to do to maintain status with their peers, they may be very unsure about how to receive positive attention from a teacher who does not share their culture or who gives cues that are inconsistent with those they receive at home. The result is the beginning of a path that in most serious cases can lead to school failure or less than optimum performance. For children who are not of the dominant culture, behavioral cues that are valued at home are often at odds with the dominant culture.

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[2] These reports have been extensively quoted in the press but are only available to the public at high expense. This figure was confirmed through personal communication with a Nielsen employee (who also supplied the citation).

## Play as a Pedagogical Tool

As an educator who trains professionals who will work with children and families in school or clinical settings, I have found it crucial to feature play prominently in the curriculum. In work with very young children or children who speak different languages, it is only through observing their play that we are given a window into their world, an opening to get a sense of their process, and a match between the child and the learning or living environment that we have created.

In the Pacific Oaks course, The Development of Bicultural Children,[3] I routinely give the following assignment:

> ***Bicultural Observation***
>
> You will do a series of observations on a child you perceive as being bicultural. The focus of this assignment is to assess how the child is functioning within the environment in which the observation takes place.
>
> 1. What skills do you see being utilized with success?
>
> 2. Does the child's play tell you anything about her "fit" in the environment?

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[3] The *biculturation process* is defined as how a child whose primary culture is anything other than European American learns to acculturate to the dominant culture while maintaining a primary cultural reference to his or her own culture of origin (Cooper, 1989).

> 3. In what ways does/should the classroom teacher, or other available adults, assist the child?
>
> Do four observations on the same child. The observational periods should last at least thirty minutes. Two of the observations should take place in a class or another situation where there is an adult in charge and in close proximity. Two should be done in peer-directed situations, free play, or other types of social interaction.

When I began giving this assignment seven years ago, I was not prepared for what my students would report in their observations. It didn't matter if it was in Pasadena, Seattle, or Palo Alto—the day that students reported on this assignment, I would hear story after story of a child of color failing in an all-white environment or in a school situation. My students were generally troubled by what they observed and often reported feeling an obligation to go back and "fix" what they had observed. They saw:

- ☐ children who were never seen or heard until they were involved in a negative social interaction. In these situations, it was often generally assumed that whatever disturbance occurred was the child's fault, and any attempt at problem solving or resolution was based on this;
- ☐ children whose appropriate language and interactions were often ignored, while every negative behavior was zeroed in on.

"Acting out" was the common element in many of these interactions. "Getting into trouble" would lead to the sentiment I once heard voiced by an African-American boy named Prince, who was in first grade at the time. He told me, "I don't like school, I can't even play right there." While these children and their behavior are quite noticeable and cry out for attention, even if for negative reasons, what about the child who "acts in"? The child who may be a relational learner and may not be getting the cues that she needs from her teacher to do well in school? The child who can't try anything new with confidence because she doesn't think her teacher likes her? She doesn't create any problems—in fact, you'd hardly know she was there, and then one day she isn't.

Observing children at play can give a teacher an indication of how these children function under a different set of circumstances. Teachers are sometimes shocked to see how well their "problem children" function in environments with little or a different type of adult interaction. Such observations can provide valuable clues to why children who cause considerable "problems" in a classroom are nevertheless quite popular with peers.

In discussing placing play in a more prominent role in the curriculum, it is important to recognize that parents and teachers from other racial and ethnic groups view play quite differently from the NAEYC-sanctioned, progressive educators whose voices are dominant within the field of early childhood education. In an increasingly hostile nation, parents of oppressed groups are suspicious of anything that may reduce their child's competitiveness in the job market. When play is viewed as "messing around," it's hard to see its importance in the curriculum. It's also a leap of faith to trust a teacher who tells you that play is important but who can't demonstrate to you why or how it will benefit your child in the future. If you want parents to trust you as an educator, you'd better be able to demonstrate the importance of play in a convincing manner.

Convincing the skeptical is going to take strong curriculum building and planning. It will take designing play environments that enhance learning and then explaining to parents how they work. Strong observational skills are a crucial part of this. When I worked with children, many times I would stand next to a parent as we observed her child. I would often discuss what I was seeing in terms of the problem solving, motor skills, or other aspect of developmental practice. Generally speaking, parents were quite enthralled with what I described to them. I was a trained observer of young children, they were not, and initially they didn't see what I saw. However, once I shared my observations with them, they began to develop a different appreciation for the skills of play and to view play with new eyes. The net result was that they began to trust me as an educator, and they began to understand learning a lot more. Most parents' memories of their own educational experiences were of school as important but boring. If you can demonstrate that learning can be fun as well as substantive, parents will be willing to accept this practice.

From an African-American perspective, ours is a culture that does not view play as something that should take place in school. Play is an amusing part of childhood, but it isn't viewed as a critical part of the learning process. Do black children learn through play differently from children of the dominant culture? Probably, given a cultural context in which different things are valued (even considering how the dominant media culture my be reflected in all children's play). It seems logical to assume that the play that takes place will somehow reflect those values.As a child, I spent a lot of time "playing school" with my younger brother and other neighborhood children. I was the teacher, and I had my students sit at "desks" while I read to or taught them something. As I look back, I definitely do not consider this to have been a playful model, but I got a lot of attention for it, all positive, especially in my efforts to make my brother sit still! Yet this was a game that reflected the values that my culture held to be important about play. It was also a game that pretty accurately reflected the coming roles that my brother and I would come to play in school.

## What Are Some Cultural Values Transmitted through Play?

In African-American girls living primarily in monocultural working-class environments, verbally assertive, "bossy" behavior is often viewed in a positive light. This behavior is generally rewarded by being given the responsibilities and perks that go with being a helpful, useful member of the family and not just another kid. Such behavior is therefore considered good and a sign of intelligence. In play, this is a child who would select roles where she could be the boss or be in charge of the other children. She would be the one to set and enforce the rules.

Traditionally, this would express itself through being the teacher or the "Mommy" in play. On television, this transmits into a junior "Sapphire" figure, but with a twist. Since the adults are typically absent, the viewer gets no sense of balance about this child's role and that it fits in a certain social context. If an adult is present, the child probably bosses her/him too, which is a misrepresentation of the true cultural model, in which the adult is always clearly in charge and the child is carrying out the adult's wishes.

There is also a "Mommy" role in a latina context that is quite different from the role in the dominant culture. Young girls are often called "Mommy" as a term of endearment. It is a term that embodies the role of the mother as nurturer and caregiver. Playing Mommy for such a child will then resolve around the nurturing, caregiving aspects of that role. This is a role that differs greatly from the one represented in the media as being the "modern American Mom" (read *white Mom*). It is also contrary to what many teachers of the dominant culture want to nurture and encourage as part of a woman's role. So who's right? Your family? Your culture? Your teacher? Or the media?

The Saturday before Halloween, as I was walking my dogs, I passed a Halloween party that was being held in my neighborhood. The children were all in costume: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, G.I. Joe, a Pink Power Ranger, Pocahontas, even a French Maid! The play was lively, the conversations were in Spanish with a sprinkling of English words thrown in. The mothers stood nearby, their conversation in Spanish. Given the demographics of my neighborhood and my knowledge of these kids (who know my dogs and me quite well!), I would venture a guess that the oldest of the children present were born in Mexico and not in the U.S. The younger children were born in the U.S., but they live in homes where Spanish is the dominant language. They are learning English from older siblings and will be pretty bilingual by the time they go to school. I wondered what they knew of the characters that they were pretending to be and if the language or their culture makes any difference in who they imagined themselves to be? And if so, how? An interesting observation I've made is that in monocultural ethnic play, the race of characters does not matter. Anyone can be anything, since we are all brown and the characters portrayed in the media are typically white. When the play is integrated, this does not happen. White children are quick to remind children of color that you can't be "so and so" because you are not white.

My son had such an experience while getting ready for a Halloween parade at school while he was in kindergarten. A white friend told him, "You can't really be Rambo, because he's white and you're not." Years later, when Alex told me about this, he said, "I didn't feel like going after that. I just wanted to go home. I knew that I couldn't, though." I don't think that this child meant to hurt Alex, but he did. From his point of view, I'm sure he was just interjecting reality into the situation—his reality. And his reality is reinforced on television and in the movies.

Behavioral expectations of teachers are often based on media images. An example of this is the aggressive behavior of African-American and latino boys. Anyone can see and learn that from almost any media outlet: television, music, and films. According to these sources, most African-American and latino males grow up to be criminals. So the sooner you come down on them for aggressive behavior, the better off all of society will be. But what's aggressive to the dominant culture may be looked at as "taking care of yourself" in another context. This observation clearly captures the positive roles of aggression and persistence in the socialization of latino males. It is evident in any group play situation where adults of the culture are present. When the supervising adults are not of the latino culture, the play is viewed as overly aggressive and stopped.

> Two Latino boys approximately four and ten years of age are lying on the seats of the swings on their stomachs. They are swinging, dragging their feet in the sand. The younger boy looks around and keeps glancing at the older boy for approval to see if he's "doing it right." The older boy begins to rock his swing from side to side, bumping into the younger boy, who tries to bump back. He is unsuccessful in his attempt to retaliate, probably due to his size and lack of strength. The older boy begins to laugh at him and seems to be taunting him. (They are speaking in Spanish, and at a distance, so I can't make out the words.)
>
> The younger boy gets off his swing and lies over the head of the older boy, still trying to use his weight to move the swing from side to side. He is still unsuccessful, and though he can't see him, the older boy grabs him with his hands and holds on tight. The younger boy tries to wiggle away and fall down to the sand. The older boy laughs, the younger boy looks at his hands and picks up two handsful of sand and throws them in the face of the older boy, who then has to let go of him to wipe the sand from his eyes.

> The older boy gets off the swing, wipes his eyes, grabs the younger boy, and hugs him. Both boys beam. The elder says something to him, and then speaks to the adults who have been standing close by, observing the whole thing. The older boy speaks, the adults nod and comment approvingly. I know what is being said: "Tiene cajones" or, "He's got balls."

As I watched this play, I thought of how valued it was in this context and how much trouble both boys would be in for playing this way at school. I thought of how few words were used in this situation and how false it is to pretend that all conflicts can be solved with words. It is important what you can do with your body, important to think and act fast.

This play is traditionally displayed in "good guy/bad guy" games of many types. These are games of chase and dominance, which frequently feature an older boy who is "taunting" and setting the challenges for the younger ones. These characterizations tend not to be represented in the media these days in forms that are accessible to young children. But that doesn't mean that they aren't being exposed to them through movies and videos, with some unfortunately violent overtones.

Funny, this all takes us back to the media, which have become the image makers of our dominant culture, creating images that extend beyond this country, all over the world. The role of the media in the play and acculturation of our nation's children deserves increased and continued scrutiny. Perhaps this is beginning to occur, although I am uncertain that increased federal regulation can ultimately provide us with any answers. I do believe that as early childhood educators, we need to play a more active role in informing parents on both the importance of play and how this play is influenced by the choices that they as parents make. This educating will be done one parent at a time, in a consistent fashion: this is called leadership.

# 8

# "They Can't Even Play Right!" Cultural Myopia in the Analysis of Play—Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

Terry Meier
Wheelock College

Peter C. Murrell, Jr.
Northeastern University

*Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress.*

*Until next Sunday when we are walking through the flea market on Maxwell Street and there! Lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a*

> *fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails. There! Where? Two Mattel boxes. One with the "Career Gal" ensemble, snappy black-and-white business suit, three-quarter-length sleeve jacket with kick-pleat skirt, red sleeveless shell, gloves, pumps, and matching hat included. The other, "Sweet Dream" dreamy pink-and-white plaid nightgown and matching robe, lace-trimmed slippers, hairbrush and hand mirror included. How much? Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, until they say okay.*
>
> —from Sandra Cisneros, *Barbie-Q*

Barbie, object of desire in Cisneros's vignette about a little girl growing up in a Mexican-American community in the 1960s, is still very much a "toy of choice" for many little girls living in the 1990s, as a stroll down the aisles of almost any major toy store in the U.S. will quickly confirm. For very different reasons, Barbie is also high on the list of a number of educators and other child advocates concerned about the potentially harmful effects of some children's toys. Every year, a few weeks before Christmas, at the peak of the present-buying frenzy for children, these concerns become the subject of a good deal of attention in the public media. For a couple of years now, we have been struggling to put our finger on what it is we find so irksome about public conversations about the appropriateness of various toys.

Now, don't get us wrong—not all of these public conversations are irksome. Who could deny the value of consumer warnings about toys with dangerous parts that could be swallowed or that might go up in flames? On the other hand, analyses suggesting that playing with certain toys can have harmful, and clearly predictable, psychological consequences for children—that action figures like the Power Rangers, can precipitate violent behavior among boys, or that Barbie's impossibly proportioned physique can promote anorexic behaviors among girls—just don't sit well with us. Nor do the more benign critiques claiming that toys like Barbie and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers stifle the development of children's imagination and creativity by encouraging play that is repetitive, passive, and ultimately only imitative of television.

Why exactly do such analyses bother us so much? In part, because they are too simplistic. There are two issues we think are salient. First, in a nation grasping for answers to problems that seem increasingly complex and difficult to solve, some analysts too easily draw causal connections between playing with particular toys or playing in particular ways and the development of specific behaviors and attitudes. The tendency to draw these connections, despite the absence of definitive research, is vividly illustrated by the frequency with which violent toys and television are linked to the most disturbing instances of violence among children appearing in the public media, such as the disturbing recent story of a ten year old beating an infant to death.

The second issue we want to raise here has to do with how play in culturally diverse communities is construed by observers who are not members of those communities. Take, for example, the critique which claims that playing with Barbie dolls tends to encourage female passivity and self-identification as a "sex object." Leaving aside for a moment the issue raised above—that there is no research establishing any kind of causal relationship among these variables—in the absence of data about what children from various cultural and socioeconomic communities actually *do* with Barbie dolls and the cultural meanings that are attached to those behaviors, there is little justification for making a priori judgments about whether or not Barbie is a "good" toy for children to play with.

Cisneros' *Barbie-Q* is an excellent case in point. In this vignette, the ritualistic nature of the play between the narrator and her girlfriend ("Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie . . .") and the Barbies' highly stylized fights over the invisible Ken ("You dumbbell! He's mine." "Oh no he's not, you stinky!") serve not to foster female passivity and deference to males but instead to reinforce and celebrate the primacy of female friendship. Rather than stifling the imagination, Barbie becomes, for Cisneros, the literal "stuff of imagination" as she transforms her own memories of playing Barbie into a story about friendship in a particular cultural context.

The fact is that there are many communities in which children do not share the same sensibilities, meanings, and values as the researchers who write in universalistic terms about "children's play." We believe that it is highly problematic when inquiry into children's play and human development fails to account for the cultural contexts in which they occur. In this chapter, we are advocating a more systematic and careful examination of the social and cultural contexts of children's play.

Our aim is to address the oversight of ***cultural myopia in the study of play.*** We will do this by first revisiting relevant theory to articulate the role of culture and play in the study of children's development. Then we will illustrate what we mean by cultural myopia in play in light of the theory. Finally, we will examine paradigms shift and the emergence of new perspectives on human development, developmental psychology, cognition, and learning that provide the means for "unmyopic" study.[1]

## Culture and the Role of Children's Play

The role of play in children's development is widely recognized among researchers and practitioners in early childhood education. Vygotsky (1978) has given this role particularly strong prominence. Referring to play as "the highest level of preschool development," he writes:

> In play, a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development (p. 102).

It is in play that the child first loses her sole dependence on the physical world as a motivator for action and begins to act on the basis of ideas. For the very young child, Vygotsky tells us, it is things that dictate what she must do: "a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be climbed a bell to be rung" (p. 96). For the child old enough to play, however, a staircase no longer "demands" to be climbed, but instead is subject to the child's fancy and serves the purposes of play. It becomes a train, a bus, an apartment house for paper dolls. In the tradition of Piaget and most contemporary developmental theory, this liberation of children's thought and perception from dependence on the physical world is heralded as an important developmental achievement because it not only lays the foundation for later symbolic reasoning but also allows the "working out" in imagination of many childhood dilemmas.

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[1] Although we draw most on theoretical developments in the disciplines of educational psychology, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology, there are, of course, parallel developments in cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and other disciplines that intersect in interesting ways.

Contemporary theory holds that when children acquire the means to see objects as "standing for" something else, their capacity for symbolic representation and imaginative play is subsequently amplified, making possible more imaginative play and more sophisticated use of concepts, rules, and roles. This capacity is called ***signification*** when it is used to communicate to *others* the use of an object as a sign or symbol for something else.

Those who analyze children's play must account for children's significations. To the extent that children's play reveals stabilized uses of signs and symbols, concepts will be in operation during play. Therefore, a careful study of play must not only take careful account of how children construe their own signs and symbols used in play but also everything about the situation that is indicative of what the signs and symbols in use might mean in that context. Consider an example given by Harre and Gilbert involving a slip of paper. If a child who has had no experience with tickets is given a slip of paper, the meaning of the concept "ticket" will be beyond her grasp, even if during play the slip of paper is given to the child by another in the way a ticket is meant to be used. If in play or in real-life ticket use the child acquires the range of experience that begin to organize the concept of ticket, then the paper may begin to signify "ticket." The trick for careful analysis of play is not to impose one's own significations on the props—such as assuming that Barbie dolls are objects signifing sex identification as opposed to the actual signification of the children in Cisneros's example, where Barbie was merely a prop for enactments of their future selves as women and lifelong friends.

We think it is important to point out, however, that there is much more going on in play than the expansion of children's capacity to represent and manipulate concepts, rules, and roles. A child made uneasy and frightened when her mother leaves her with a baby-sitter is reassuringly in charge when she reminds her doll babies that she'll be coming home soon before clomping out the bedroom door in her mother's high heels. A child frustrated by his older brother's always taking the larger share of treats is able to work out, and indeed to *control* the working out, of a more equitable distribution of plastic treats among his stuffed animal companions on an imaginary trip to McDonald's.

The mental representations of the world that children draw upon in play are not merely internal representations of objects and relations. Children also internalize the rules, behavioral codes, and social constraints from the social and cultural contexts they grow up in. The extent to which these "mental representations" direct children's activities in play is well illustrated by Vygotsky's example (taken from Sully) of two sisters, aged five and seven, "playing sisters." Within this game, the child acts out her conception of what a sister should be. Vygotsky writes:

> In life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister's sister. In the game of sisters playing at 'sisters,' however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters decided to play sisters induces them both to acquire rules of behavior. Only actions that fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation . . . ( p. 95)

What are the "rules of behavior" Vygotsky refers to in this example, and from where do these rules originate? We would argue—and this is in fact our main point—that these rules are a cultural construction, a set of behavioral rules or norms of interaction that define "being a sister" within the context of a particular cultural community. In the process of "playing sisters," the girls in Vygotsky's example draw upon this cultural construction to guide both their own and one another's behavior. Through this process, they both co-enact and jointly recreate their culture's definition of "sister-ness."

For an accurate interpretation of this sister play, we must immediately ask, ***where does each of the children get her mental representation of "sisterness"?*** To what extent can it be considered a representation both shared between them and also worked out, i.e., learned, through the process of play? We would argue that their mental representation, their conception, of what it means to be a sister is a cultural construct that the sisters draw upon both to act out their roles of "sister" during play and to monitor and give feedback on one another's behavior. In the process, the mental representation becomes a joint construction. The children's play behavior is thus deeply steeped in culture.

## An Example of Play in an African-American Community

In her study of a group of African-American girls playing house, Goodwin (1990) provides a rich illustration of the interplay between the "rules of mother-ness" as a cultural construction, on the on hand, and the children's re-invention of the cultural construction through play, on the other hand. The rules she illustrates in her episode of girls playing house concerns how they organize the status relationships of the participants (e.g., "build a hierarchy") through the use of unmasked imperatives and directives. In the episode, the most highly valued role is that of the mother.

According to Goodwin, girls enacting the role of mother when playing house address directives to their "children" that are similar in structure to those that their own mothers use. The girls deliver loud and emphatic directives in play-mother talk, which, as Goodwin points out, has been demonstrated in earlier research to be the principal means by which children realize the position of dominance and submission between characters, such as that of the mother/child relationship. In the episode, Patrice, with three "children" (Kerry, Bea, and Brenda) in her household, and Martha, with two "children" (Prestina and Drucilla), issue directives in the following interchanges:[2]

(66) Patrice: Hurry up and go to bed!

(67) Martha: BRING THOSE CARDS BACK,
BRING THAT BOOK IN THE HOUSE
AND COME HOME!

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[2] In sociolinguistic conversational data transcription, line numbering is used to give readers a contextual location for portions of the interchange. The equal signs, bold type, italics, and slashes are used to notate different emphases and rhythms. These are left in here for accuracy of quotation so that readers can derive the lively sense of tone.

Don't *climb* over that way.
You climb over the *right* way.

(68) Martha: Drucilla, BRENDA, Prestina,
GET IN THE CAR!
Get in the car.
Prestina and Brenda, and all y'all get in the car. =
Where Drucilla at. GET IN THE CAR.
YOU GOIN' OVER *MY* HOUSE.
GO ON OVER AND GET—
UH—WHERE'S DRUCILLA AT.

(69) Martha: COME ON *DRU*CILLA,
Drucilla: We playin' cards,
Martha: I DON'T CARE *WHAT* YOU PLAYIN'.=
IT'S TIME TO GO *IN*.
= YOU GOTTA GO TO *SCHOOL*
TOMORROW!

This interchange illustrates the assumption of the mother role in accordance with the construct of motherness: the "mothers" provide culturally sanctioned reasons why activities of the "children" should be done in specific ways.

Goodwin in this Maple Street episode shows how an asymmetry in the enacted behavior of the mother and children during play mirrors that of the care/taker child relationships in that community. Despite the fact that the issuance of directives by the "mother" is the clearest sign of dominance in the role play, the Maple Street girls do not uniformly display deference in accordance with their "child" role. In particular, Goodwin found that although the "children" displayed deference in requests for information (e.g., "Can I hold your book?" and "How old am *I*?"), they did not always display deference in their responses to the "mothers'" imperatives. Instead, Goodwin reports that they follow a pattern used in responding to their own mothers—a pattern of excuses and counter accusations:

1 Martha: COME ON *DRU*CILLA.
2 Dru: We playin' cards.

3 Martha: I DON'T CARE *WHAT* YOU PLAYING'.=
COME ON.=
IT'S TIME TO GO *IN*.
5 = YOU GOTTA GO TO *SCHOOL*
TOMORROW!
6 DRU: Prestina TOOK THE CARDS,
7 Martha: Prestina!
8 Dru: Prestina took//some a' the cards.

So the variations on the role are culturally and socially defined, as is the role itself.

To summarize to this point, we take issue with researchers and children's advocates who write in universalistic terms about children's play without taking into account the cultural contexts in which play occurs. We have argued that the absence of systematic evidence about what children from various cultural and socioeconomic communities actually ***do*** with Barbie dolls and action figures makes the crusade to eliminate certain types of toys a misplaced priority in our common effort to address violence in our society. We argue instead that our chief priority is to achieve a more systematic and careful understanding of how violence is socialized by examining the social and cultural contexts of children's play.

Children grow into cognitive life and are ***socialized into cultural life***. Play is the means by which we can understand children's constructs of the world. So although representations of violent person-to-person conflict abound in the media, even in animated television fare (e.g., GI Joe, X-Men), these are not necessarily children's constructions. Children reinvent and reconstruct as they internalize new understanding. So the developmental question is not simply one of how we diminish the effect of exposure by limiting ***children's access to props*** (e.g., action figures), but rather of how we deal with the real ***cultural expressions of violence and aggression among adults*** in the social contexts in which children grow up.

## Play as "Acts of Meaning" in Cultural Context

We now move to an examination of the recent turn to a new perspective on human development, developmental psychology, cognition, and learning that provides theoretical foundation for a "culturally *un*myopic" study of play. Following Harre and Gillet, we will use the term "discursive psychology"[3] to refer to the new perspective, which seeks to restore the communicative context back into studies of mind and cognitive development. In this account, play consists of acts of meaning, in the sense meant by Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1990). To study play is not merely to study children's symbolism in order to get at what they are thinking and how their thinking develops. It is also an understanding of children's use of signs and their construction of meaning in the communicative and cultural contexts in which play occurs.

The philosopher Wittgenstein once said that "meaning is the use to which we put our signs." Following on this idea, discursive psychology takes account of children's significations (uses of signs) as psychological phenomena we should pay attention to in order to understand the development of their thinking and meaning making (Harre and Gilbert, 1994).[4] On this account, the study of play is the study of the development of mind in such a way as to avoid interpreting children's experiences separately from the communicative and cultural contexts that give them meaning:

> The study of the mind is a way of understanding the phenomena that arise when different social cultural discourses are integrated within an identifiable human individual situated in relation to those discourses (Harre and Gilbert, 1994, p. 22).

Children, we repeat, grow into cognitive life and are ***socialized into cultural life***. Play is the first means by which children make use of symbols/signs in their preverbal world. Through play we are

[3] Other terms of reference for this new perspective include "folk psychology" (Greenwood, 1991; Bruner, 1990), and "cultural psychology" (Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt, 1990). The reader should refer to Bruner (1990) and Harre and Gilbert (1994) for a thorough discussion of the emergence of this new perspective and paradigm shift.

[4] As Harre and Gilbert point out, the so-called "second cognitive revolution" was a turning away from the technologic project of ascertaining how the human mind interpreted, "processed," and "internally represented" information in meaningful ways. The revolution was, instead, a turning toward the original aims of the "first" cognitive revolution—namely, the project of discovering and describing the meanings that human beings create out of their encounters with the world. Because this project involves the determination and description of the symbolic activities that human beings employ in constructing and making sense of the world, the centrality of studying culture, narrative, and language was assured.

able to see children's intentional construction of meaning as they internalize relationships between signs and the social-cultural contexts in which they are used. For Vygotsky, ***internalization*** is the process by which the social becomes the psychological. This means that internalization of function and structure is not the transferral of an external action or activity to an internal representation, as suggested by Piagetian theory, but instead the process by which the internal "plane of consciousness" is formed.

Recall Vygotsky's example of playing sisters. He is telling us that in deciding to "play sisters," the two girls become aware of the rules of behavior of sisterhood normally enacted out of awareness but that become explicit to the girls as constraints to the "game." But there is more going on in this play than the sisters gaining a meta-awareness of the cultural codes or behavioral rules for "being a sister." First, the behavioral rules that direct play are, in the course of play, reworked or "reinvented," to use Vygotsky's term. Children in play are not bound by the rules in their role enactments, as their play may constitute variations on the theme. For example, if one sister chooses the role of "mean sister," the behavioral codes for "sisterhood" are the basis for the fanciful creation of the mean sister in play. In play the cultural codes and behavioral rules for sisterhood not only direct the play but also are ***re-invented*** in the course of play.

The child's "plane of consciousness" is formed in the structures that are transmitted to the child by others in speech, social interactions, and interactions of cooperative activity. Thus, individual consciousness arises not merely from the recapitulations of one's own actions and speech but also from the actions and speech of others. These notions fit "relational practice" as well as the "ecology of mind" and the intelligence of individuals built into social systems. Although Vygotsky never explicitly incorporated the concept of culture as we currently understand it, it's clear that the social plane of his theory incorporates the cultural features of the community in which the developing child is socialized.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget proposed ***invention*** and ***internalization*** as key processes in the cognitive development of children. For both (and especially for Piaget), the insight is that to ***understand is to reconstruct***. Piaget and Vygotsky agree that the child has an active role in the reorganization and reconstruction of these experiences and that as the external plane is internalized, transformations in structure and function occur. Vygotsky's theory offers the insight that it is important to look not just at the individual but also at the external world—including its social, historical, and cultural aspects.

> From the very first days of the child's development his activities acquire a meaning of their own in a system of social behavior and, being directed towards a definite purpose, are refracted through the prism of the child's environment. The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex of human structure is a product of a development process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history (Vygotsky, p. 30).

Unfortunately, Piaget and Vygotsky never got around to addressing the social and cultural context of cognitive development. What is important here, however, is the clear and deep sense of what is meant by ***constructivism***. The construction detailed in theory above is clearly ***not*** accessible to an observer looking at a single episode of children's play. This construction is developmental—it takes place over a period of time in social and cultural context—and is not determinable in the informal observations of a parent, teacher, or caregiver.

According to the theory of Piaget and Vygotsky, what children construct through play cannot be ascertained by either casual or systematic observation without an understanding of the social-cultural contexts in which the play occurs. Without this understanding, any observational judgments a parent, teacher, or caregiver makes about whether the play involves "dynamic knowledge construction" or is "merely repetitive and imitative" will reveal more about the observer's own cultural biases than it will about children's construction of meaning. So the danger in the recent embrace of constructivism is in its potential for practitioners and theorists alike to dress old biases in new clothes.

As Phillips (1995) demonstrates, there is a vast diversity of constructivist views, which, once you get past the common thesis that "knowledge is constructed," bear little resemblance to one another. The extent to which "constructivism has become something akin to a secular religion" (Phillips, 1995, p. 5) hampers attempts to develop unmyopic play theory and interpretations of play. Therefore, the concept of looking at play through a "constructivist lens" deserves a great deal of careful consideration, for the view is more a kaleidoscopic composite of patterns than a single image viewed through a single lens (constructivist or otherwise).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we advocated a more systematic and careful examination of the social and cultural contexts of children's play. We argued for a critical look at contemporary approaches to children's play in light of cultural myopia, that failure to take into account the cultural contexts in which play occurs. The significance of culture as a defining feature in the emergence of cognitive development is acknowledged in the theory of both Piaget and Vygotsky, although neither got around to addressing culture specifically. Gregory Bateson articulated the role of culture nearly forty years ago in this way:

> The culture into which an individual is born stresses the certain of his potentialities and suppresses others, and it acts selectively, favoring the individuals who are best endowed with the potentialities preferred in the culture and discriminating against those with alien tendencies. In this way the culture standardizes the organization of the emotions of individuals (Bateson, 1958, p. 115).

Taking account of culture requires a deeper look at the signs and symbols—the use children make of the props—in play. It also requires a deep look at oneself as an observer so that one's own culturally bound assumptions and biases do not prejudice the critical work of determining children's use of their props in play—both material (e.g., Barbie dolls, action figures) and conceptual-symbolic (e.g., "sister," "girlfriend"). We have to get beyond the unreflective, atheoretic, superficial, and ungrounded designation of activities children are engaged in, involving either props or other children, as play. This means no longer merely defining play in terms of activities of children that people would conventionally characterize as play, such as referring to an individual child manipulating toys on the floor as ***individual play,*** or a group of children doing so as ***group play,*** or children doing so outdoors as ***outdoor play,*** and so on.

Play is an important developmental process in childhood. Children are ***working out meanings that pertain to needs***—and many of these are culturally constrained. Vygotsky writes:

> The maturing of needs is a dominant issue in this discussion because it is impossible to ignore the fact that the child satisfies certain needs in play. If we do not understand the special character of these needs, we cannot understand the uniqueness of play as a form of activity (p. 92–93).

Following Wittgenstein's dictum that "meaning is the use we make of our signs," play is the use that children make of symbols (Bruner's props). Vygotsky: "Play in a child creates an imaginary situation." Play is to be understood as symbolic, but, as Vygotsky warns, not in the sense of adult symbol use or manipulation of symbols for purposes other those intentions and incentives of the child engaged in play. Hence, in conjunction with symbolic "imagineering," play is realization in symbolic forms of tendencies that cannot be immediately gratified (Vygotsky, p. 94).

Assumptions made about other people's children in the absence of cultural understanding—the classic problem that Lisa Delpit talks about—is the issue here in making judgments about play behavior. With no cultural analysis, play theorists and practitioners are unlikely to understand "the use children make of their signs." We have seen numerous instances in which toys such as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers were the tools by which children carried out expressive play, dramas that had little to do with those depicted on television. So our real concern is not the props themselves but how children are socialized into particular uses of the props in play. Toward this end, what always seems to get left out is an analysis of what meaning the children themselves ascribe to these props. Imitation is not the sole means by which play should be interpreted; it's the use to which children put signs and props that is more significant.

The best examples of the worst cultural myopia are the crusades against the props of play (e.g., Barbie dolls, action figures) masquerading as an intervention on behalf of children—to save them from self-identification with violent expression and as sex objects. With no cultural analyses, this seems to us the classic case of white America working out its own anxieties regarding the issues that seem to threaten the social fabric. It seems to us disingenuous to condemn and restrict the use of props from one cultural perspective without fully exploring and understanding the rich world in which children may use the props as expressions of fashion, folklore, and "futuring" in self-expression. In what ways are the stimulating use of imagination, imaginative use of form, variations on a theme, verbal play, and improvisation with these props going on in cultural communities that are not middle-class white America? It is the future contribution of play theory to find out.

# Section Three

## Perspectives on Contexts and Collaborations for the Support of Play

Enlarging our analysis of play, our sociocultural perspectives, in our research and teaching designs, our priority setting for advocacy—is a theme of this book. Beginning with the earliest consortium collaborations, a moratorium was called on familiar assumptions and a call was posted for exploration on how play is useful to all children, how one's play as a child affects one's adult propensities, and how adults can better support children's play.

This section reveals some of the interesting ways in which play-support roles are being redrawn and in which play justifications are being more broadly conceived. It helps us think about how to advocate more effectively, using expanded explanations of play's usefulness to children and society. It illustrates where traditional boundaries are being redrawn and enlarged as professionals engage in play's support. It also imagines fresh ways in which we can capitalize on play's multiplicative, creative, and adaptable nature.

A trend to reconceptualize and enlarge the function and support of play is occurring in rapidly changing institutional settings: in reshaped, inclusive classrooms, as addressed in chapter Ten and in clinics and hospitals, as addressed in chapter Eleven. In chapter Nine, Bartolini encourages us to recognize that play, far from being of limited purpose for only young children and irrelevant to the world of adult work and responsibilities, is actually critical in building competencies that the most successful workers of the future must have (including health and education professionals, who will need these adaptive skills in the settings referred to above).

Bartolini provides a strong argument for taking play seriously by reversing the traditional arguments against it, such as its so-called irrelevance and lack of seriousness. She describes current research that indicates that the most successful workers are creative and socially capable rather than merely highly skilled or intelligent. She then interprets various play scenarios to show how they enable children to develop social competence, to set and solve interesting problems, and thus to develop the kinds of skills they will need as effective employees. This argument helps advocates for play address parents' concerns about play's usefulness to their children's future (a particular concern when opportunities for oppressed peoples are increasingly constricted, as discussed in chapter Seven).

Both of the next two sets of authors describe work situations in which these kinds of creativity and social competence are proving to be essential abilities. When describing the expanded role of play in inclusive classroom settings, Marchant and Render Brown indicate that teachers must perform "calculated balancing acts" among professionals and parents with varying perspectives and styles of interaction and their very diverse students. Play is seen as a pivotal curriculum agent in making inclusion work and in providing learning opportunities for all students.

At the same time, a team wishing to utilize the full potential of play to meet the diverse needs of each child needs training, resources, and support. To this end, authors Marchant and Render Brown present a model for a continuum of interventions and facilitations around play, from more to less directive, with a constructivist approach falling in the middle. They indicate that it is possible to find "the right balance between intervening to facilitate play and pulling back to allow play to develop naturally, once our supportive gestures are no longer needed." They also suggest this can only be done with the diverse skills and knowledge of families and professionals in real collaboration, "just as the provision of integrated therapies has demanded that we figure out new forms of interprofessional teamwork."

The authors who follow also consider these calculated balancing acts among professions within team settings delivering integrated therapies. Kingson and her five co-authors are Child Life specialists who work on interprofessional teams in the interests of children's healthy development as they and their families encounter the health professions. They are concerned with their profession's expanding responsibilities in the context of the rapidly changing health care system, which requires them to both operate with fewer resources and to meet more needs of more acutely sick children than ever before. To address these challenges, four of the authors, each working in an urban hospital, presented a debate at a national conference. Extreme positions were taken for clarity: on play room-based vs. diversified, medical-intervention strategies; and on facilitation of nondirected and child-led play or adult-guided play focused around perceived acute needs. The authors' synthesis describes a potentially less polarized position that take into account how to facilitate play that "most appropriately addresses a child's needs at a given point in time." These can vary, not only "from day to day, but from hour to hour," and even from minute to minute in the intense environment of the health institution. The synthesis is also highly applicable to the inclusive classroom that Marchant and Render Brown have described.

This transcendence of dichotomies may be a good place for me to conclude: play is vital in itself, and play is a vector through which all manner of things can be understood, developed, and articulated. At the same time that we preserve and protect play for play's sake, we can also celebrate its usefulness in learning, working, healing, and becoming who one is, who we are. This is why we are playing for keeps.

9

# On-the-Job Training: Children's Play and Work

Vicki Bartolini
Wheelock College

Ongoing media discussions forecast trends facing the work force in the year 2000. The airwave ethos predicts that workers of the future will change jobs every three to five years and that the loyal company employee with a guaranteed job for life is a person of the past. What do these same pundits say about the characteristics of the successful job hunter of the future? Besides the obvious technological proficiencies, so-called people skills are often cited: ability to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, problem solve, be assertive, empathize, be flexible, "read others," listen actively, and control impulses. In addition, workers will need to consider themselves "self-employed" to successfully ride the waves of periodic job change.

## Success in Life and Work

In the recent bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), Daniel Goleman described the qualities that characterize people who excel in life: self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal, self-motivation, empathy, and social deftness. In reviewing data from a study comparing the destinies of ninety-five Harvard grads from the classes of the 1940s who had roughly equal intellectual abilities, schooling, and opportunity, he observed that at middle age "men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their lower-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity, or status in their field" (Goleman, 1995, p. 35). He also cited a similar follow-up study, done with 450 boys who grew up in comparatively different circumstances in Somerville, Massachusetts, a "blighted slum" a few blocks from Harvard. In review of the study, he noted that "childhood abilities such as being able to handle frustrations, control emotions, and get on with other people made the greater difference . . ." These abilities surpassed IQ in determining how men fared at work by age forty-seven (Goleman, 1995, p. 35). Goleman links the two studies to make the point that high IQ and academic achievement offer little or no preparation for the turmoil of life's challenges, and that interpersonal skills can better predict work success.

Goleman often refers to Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory (1983) in his discussion of emotional intelligence. He particularly discusses four separate abilities that identify the components of interpersonal intelligence:

- organizing groups: leadership skills to coordinate the efforts of a network of people, as seen in theater directors, military officers, heads of organizations;

- negotiating solutions: mediation skills to prevent conflicts or resolve issues, as seen in the dealmaker, diplomat, lawyer, manager in a takeover;

- personal connections: relationship skills to recognize, respond, and empathize appropriately with people's feelings and concerns, as seen in the good business partner, salesperson, teacher;

☐ social analysis: insight skills to detect other's feelings, motives, and concerns, as seen in the therapist, counselor, novelist, dramatist.

## Play and its Relationship to Success in Life and Work (On-the-Job Training)

If emotional intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and people skills are key characteristics of the successful adult, how do these abilities develop? This article suggests that these abilities begin to develop during the early childhood years through "on-the-job training," or play. Through play, children have endless opportunities to develop their emotional intelligence and interpersonal intelligence. The particular focus of this article will be the role of play in developing important lifelong skills that ultimately enhance success in the workplace of the future. It will examine the rationale of early childhood programs in promoting play. Theory espoused by Vygotsky, as discussed by Berk (1994) in terms of imaginative play, will serve as the springboard for this discussion. In addition, criteria used to determine program quality and accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) will also be discussed in light of their relevance to the development of social skills even beyond early childhood programs.

## Implications of Berk's research on Vygotsky and Play

According to Berk, the ideas of Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky have greatly affected current notions about the education of young children. In Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the "mind extends beyond the skin" and is joined with other minds (Vygotsky, quoted in Berk, 1994, p. 30). Social interaction affects the development of our thinking and how we interpret the world. Correspondingly, language plays a critical role, for it is our foremost contact in social and mental contact with others. According to Berk (1994, p. 30), "a basic premise of Vygotsky's theory is that all uniquely human, higher forms of mental activity are jointly constructed and transferred to children through dialogues with other people."

Careful design of cooperative learning often exemplifies Vygotsky's theory, wherein small groups of children with varying competencies share responsibilities and resolve differences as they work toward a common goal. Although Vygotksky's ideas have been implemented in more "academic" areas such as science and social studies, their importance is also reflected in his views on play, particularly make-believe or representational play. His views on the importance of social experience and language in interpreting the world and communicating with others are consistent with his views on representational play, which develops primarily during the preschool years (Berk, 1994).

In her review of current research, Berk noted that Vygotsky considered play a major factor in development by creating a "'zone of proximal development in the child'" (Berk, 1994, p. 31). Peers, parents, teachers, and other adults interact with children in their play and help to extend, elaborate, and "scaffold" play to higher levels of psychological functioning. According to Berk, Vygotsky identified two key features in the development of play: First, he concluded that "representational play creates an imaginary situation that permits the child to grapple with unrealizable desires." Thus, children must learn to develop impulse control and to defer gratification. Second, representational play includes "rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully act out the play scene." These "rules" are social ones for acceptable behavior in given pretend situations, such as playing bedtime, house, or fire station. According to Berk, Vygotsky's attributes of play—"an imaginary situation governed by rules"—are central to the role of play in a child's development. In order to follow the rules of play in a given situation, impulsive action must be replaced by self-regulatory behavior.

Goleman also discusses the importance of impulse control in *Emotional Intelligence* (1995, p. 285), stating, "Being able to put aside one's self-centered focus and impulses has social benefits: it opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another person's perspective. . . . These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive public discourse." As Goleman notes, our increasingly diverse society requires that that those who are considered successful adults be willing to consider other's points of view and be able to delay self-gratification. Impulse control and delay of gratification are also implicit factors in Berk's emphasis on the importance of self-regulatory behavior, which is inherent in satisfying representational play scenarios.

## Play at the Center of the Curriculum

Early childhood programs that are considered "developmentally appropriate" (NAEYC criteria) center their curriculum around play. According to the NAEYC, a key indicator of quality is the significance of play in a program's philosophy. This play should occur in uninterrupted blocks of time with inclusion of choice, developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive props, and adult facilitators to model and encourage quality interactions, language skills, and cognitive development. The NAEYC position holds that play affords the young child many opportunities to develop cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills. When play is at the center of the curriculum, as the NAEYC suggests, children develop key traits that translate into the potentially desirable skills of an effective employee.

## The Play Scenario

The dramatic play area is typically the "hub" of representational play. Often, themes are employed to encourage pretend play (e.g., restaurant, hospital, grocery store, post office, fire station, space station). Various props may be included to add to the authenticity of the experience and to encourage language development, social interaction, language usage, and practice of various roles, such as firefighter, clerk, doctor, parent, teacher, baby, etc. During play the child has multiple opportunities to practice and develop the capacities and "emotional intelligence" described by Goleman and referred to by Vygotsky in emphasizing the importance of representational play in a child's development of knowledge through social experience.

In representational play, social conventions govern the rules of behavior for a particular scenario—for example, the restaurant. Although the play is pretend, children assume typical roles as customers, waiter, chef, and cashier. Peer and adult interactions enhance learning through language interplay, acting out of typically acceptable behaviors, and social exchanges.

To be accepted into this ongoing representational play situation, several important events must take place. First, a child must make a decision to join the group. Then the child must find a way to acceptably enter the group's play. The child must be willing to express his/her desires for a role and be willing to negotiate, compromise, or wait for a turn. Once a child joins the play situation, he/she must be willing to accept the rules of behavior for this scenario or to collaborate in shifting them in a mutually agreeable manner. As play continues, the child needs to actively listen to others and to consider their points of view in order to maintain acceptance. Finally, the child must collaborate with peers to achieve ultimate satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment through play.

During representational play with peers, children have many wonderful opportunities to develop and practice those skills later needed by successful workers. A wealth of language experiences specific to the situation are available to the child. Social learning takes place as the child interacts with the group. The child must play alongside and communicate with those different from himself/herself—perhaps someone from another culture, race, family structure, or someone who is physically limited or of another age. The child needs to make decisions, articulate his/her needs effectively, problem solve to achieve the goals of the play scenario, compromise and negotiate, listen attentively, and understand the acceptable rules of behavior for the particular play situation. Skills that must be applied in play include those qualities identified by Vygotsky and Goleman as central to development and later success in life: self-control, delay of gratification, and social understanding,

During play, children also get to be risk takers and try on different roles. For example, play affords children the opportunity to experiment with roles typically associated with a single gender. Boys may practice nurturing and caretaking skills, while girls become construction workers. Some children organize the group and coordinate various activities, practicing leadership skills. Those who are active listeners and who are perceptive to the needs of others help to solve problems and to mediate the play situation. Children who may be shy can pretend to be adventurous or in charge. Children with limited English speaking skills get to practice their language skills in a nonthreatening environment where language is rich and modeled by their peers. Children also have safe opportunities to experiment with outrageous or unconventional behaviors, behaviors that may need to be altered in response to feedback from peers. Opportunities abound for practicing those creative, risk-taking behaviors that employers are looking for in effective employees, the same skills needed by those who are successfully self-employed.

Pretend play also offers opportunities for children to use their imaginations and to develop creative problem-solving strategies. For example, children in a fire-fighting scenario may plan daring rescues that entail the timely consideration of alternative rescue plans, on-the-spot decision making, teamwork, communication, and creative use of available resources. Correspondingly, with workplace situations more and more in flux, the need has never been greater for workers who, like children, can "play" with ideas and consider multiple and creative strategies while realizing the pitfalls and possibilities of various solutions. For example, those involved with developing proposals or marketing new products must work together to identify needs, develop creative, competitive, cost-efficient strategies, communicate their plan effectively, and make use of available resources to successfully implement the plan—skills also exercised in the play fire-fighting scenario.

## Implications for Parents, Early Childhood Providers, and Program Administrators

Early childhood programs that promote play and view it as a chance to "scaffold" learning are helping children to develop those lifelong people skills that help to determine their success in life and work. Educators of young children need to feel validated in their advocacy of play for its own sake, for its value for children, and for its value in helping to develop competent adults. Well-informed and articulate educators are in the unique position of influencing policy in their relationship with administrators, school boards, and parents. Often, administrators concerned with such issues as deteriorating school system test scores pressure early childhood teachers into limiting play opportunities and centering curriculum around a more academic, skills-based approach. Parents often rely on educators to help them form their philosophy of child-rearing practices, and in their quest to best prepare their child to enter school, many want emphasis placed on a skills-based curriculum. They often feel the pressures of colleagues and neighbors to give their child a "head start" in their schooling, not fully understanding the value of play in their child's development. Therefore, educators of young children need to be able to effectively articulate and argue the value of play-oriented curriculum that ultimately provides young children with on-the-job training for later success in life and work.

## 10

# The Role of Play in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

Catherine Marchant
Cheryl Render Brown
Wheelock College

Today's early childhood settings for three to eight year olds, which include child care programs, Head Starts, public and private preschools, kindergartens, and primary classrooms, are serving an increasingly diverse population of young children. Demographic changes, changes in family life, and renewed focus on federal laws mandating the inclusion of children with special needs in the "least restrictive environment" have brought before us groups of young children with varied needs, abilities, and experiences (Galinsky, 1990). This has led to new challenges for early childhood professionals striving to make settings truly inclusive of *all* children. In our struggle to achieve inclusive early childhood settings, we must not forget the role of play in young children's development and must carefully plan how we will use play to facilitate learning for all the children enrolled. Play is a hallmark of early childhood, and most practitioners and scholars agree on its value in the lives of young children (Bredekamp, 1987; Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990; Elkind, 1987; Hughes, 1991), including those with special needs (Bricker and Cripe, 1992; Fewell and Kaminski, 1988; Linder, 1990).

However, the ways in which various professionals view and use play in their work with young children have varied tremendously. Some have advocated play that is totally child directed; others have utilized play as a means of instruction; yet others have relegated play to "nonlearning" times. It is our contention that the nature of inclusive settings, because they are relatively new and encompass such a full range of children, forces us to reexamine our underlying assumptions about play, its role in child development, and its place within the early childhood curriculum. Only then can we decide upon its rightful position in inclusive early childhood settings. The commonly held belief that play is a naturally occurring activity better left alone by adults may not be relevant for many of today's young children, especially those with delays and disabilities. Similarly, beliefs that play in and of itself is not a learning experience make little sense in light of the many children whose development flourishes through play. To meet every child's needs, we believe that inclusive early childhood settings must rely on an expansive view of play that is responsive to all children. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of play in inclusive early childhood settings that serve children aged three to eight, and to describe ways in which early childhood professionals (early childhood educators, early childhood special educators, occupational and physical therapists, speech clinicians, social workers, psychologists, and other specialists), whom we will call "early childhood inclusionists," can foster play in their programs. In the following pages, we will look at various perspectives on play, advocate for a more expansive view, and offer a framework for incorporating this view into inclusive early childhood settings.

## Traditional Roles of Play in Early Childhood

Play has long been considered important to the development of young children. Research has shown its benefits in fostering children's physical knowledge (Kamaii and DeVries, 1980; Wasserman and Ivany, 1988); logical-mathematical knowledge (Almy, 1984; Kamaii, 1982); and social knowledge (Pellegrini, 1985). Other findings have supported the development of problem-solving skills (Sylva, 1977); symbolic skills (Gardner and Perkins, 1989); and interactional skills (Rubin and Howe, 1985) through play. Practitioner's experience provides more evidence of the value of play. As professionals, we have experienced first hand how infants learn a sense of object permanence and trust through the all-time favorite peek-a-boo game (Ross and Lollis, 1987); how very anxious preschoolers can work through potentially frightening and painful experiences through medical play (Kampe, 1988; McCue, 1988); or how first and second graders are able to accomplish schoolwork with depth and breadth when it is project oriented and based on their interests (Katz and Chard, 1989; Wassermann, 1990).

Traditionally, significant portions of the early childhood day are given over to play experiences (i.e., free play, outdoor play), and routine aspects of the schedule are enhanced with playful activities (such as singing while waiting turns or transforming clean-up chores into a game). This occurs primarily because early childhood professionals believe it is in the best interest of young children to engage in spontaneous play. At this time, guidelines from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1987) and the Association for Childhood Education International (1988) reinforce the necessity of play in childhood and suggest play-oriented learning experiences as indicators of quality early educational programming. "Much of young children's learning takes place when they direct their own play activities" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 3).

Just how early childhood professionals put play into practice in their settings, however, depends on more than a general belief in the importance of play in the lives of young children. As suggested by Diane Levin (1995), our specific view of the role of play in early childhood education is tied to our general understanding of how young children develop and learn. Those of us who share a constructivist perspective—that is, who see learning as an interactive process involving the construction of personal knowledge of the world—use play as the foundation upon which we build our early childhood programs. We provide ample time for play, rely on a variety of play materials and activities, and utilize a curriculum that supports play. From the constructivist perspective, early childhood professionals are responsible for nurturing children's play in two ways: first, by providing a safe, developmentally appropriate and stimulating environment for play, and second, by enriching children's play experiences with additional materials, ideas, and problems at the appropriate time. This requires astute observation, thoughtful planning, careful preparation, and responsive participation on our part, and on the availability of concrete, relevant, and interesting materials for the children to use.

On the other hand, there are many early childhood professionals who prefer a more "romantic" perspective on play (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972), taking a hands-off stance and seldom intervening in children's play activities. Those espousing this view consider it their responsibility to supply toys and other playthings and then to stand back and watch what happens. Most children can do well in such an environment because playing comes to them naturally. They have learned to play without adult instruction simply by having playthings and play activities available to them. But such an approach is not necessarily effective for the broader group of children in inclusive settings. For example, the presence alone of rice in the sand box or goop on the art table will do little to engage the preschooler who is tactilely sensitive and needs skilled encouragement to experiment with unfamiliar or unpleasant textures. And what happens to the child whose walker or wheelchair makes it difficult to chase a ball or rush outdoors with a group of peers who are busily planning their latest adventure scenario? If children's play is off limits to adults, then some children, particularly but not exclusively those with special needs, are also likely to be excluded rather than included in many play experiences. In such cases, neither the excluded nor the included children benefit, for the excluded have lost out on the play experience and the included have lost out on additional playmates.

These are the very reasons that traditionally play has had a less important role in early childhood special-education programs. Because children with disabilities often need more than the provision of play opportunities, many early childhood special-education professionals have relied heavily on behavioral methods, direct instruction, and individual therapies in their work (Linder, 1990). Within early childhood special education, play is more likely to have served the purpose of skill reinforcement (Bordner and Berkley, 1992), and in some cases, the fostering of peer relations (Smith, 1992). Recently, as more and more young children with special needs have been placed in early childhood programs, the importance of being able to play with others has taken on new meaning for them and for the professionals who work with them. Yet, play for its own sake is relatively new to early childhood special educators. Unlike early childhood constructivists, early childhood special educators have generally been trained to use play time for incidental teaching rather than relying on it as a context for learning.

It is important to remember that play has held a less significant place in early childhood special-education settings for very good reasons. Learning through play does not come as easily or as naturally to many children with special needs. Early childhood special educators worry that play is not a sufficiently systematic or intensive learning method to ensure that the children enrolled in their settings will acquire the skills and knowledge they need (Widerstrom, 1983). In addition, although the research on the play of young children with special needs is limited, there is evidence to substantiate the qualitative and quantitative differences between the play of children with and without special needs. Most early childhood special educators recognize those differences immediately upon observing the play of typically developing children; the play of children in their programs tends to be less sophisticated, more functional, and less appealing to others (Odom, McConnell, and McEvoy, 1992). Thus, research data as well as personal experiences make it difficult for early childhood special educators to utilize play in the same fashion as their colleagues in early childhood settings.

## How Can We Learn from Both Perspectives on Play?

We do not believe that any of the earlier positions on play alone can serve all children well. In early childhood and early childhood special-education settings, there have always been a few children for whom our philosophies of play have fallen short. Those settings in which professionals maintain a position on play that is totally child centered and spontaneous in nature can be problematic for children who have difficulties playing or who have few previous group play experiences. Those settings that see play as secondary to learning can become problematic for children who learn through exploration, experimentation, and discovery. The reality is that different children benefit from different approaches to play. When early childhood and early childhood special-education programs served distinctly different populations, professionals may have been able to allow differing personal philosophies to dictate the role of play in their programs instead of children's needs. However, with an increasingly diverse range of children in inclusive settings, some of whom have identified disabilities, there is much more pressure on professionals to create and adapt programs that specifically meet the individual and collective needs of the children enrolled in them.

We think inclusive settings should utilize the best of both early childhood and early childhood special-education practices because they are neither early childhood nor early childhood special-education programs. Rather, they are inclusive programs developed to meet the needs of all enrollees. As such, they demand a perspective on play that can accommodate all children and professionals with a broad repertoire of play facilitation techniques. No longer are we mainstreaming or integrating children with special needs into existing early childhood programs; instead, we are creating new settings inclusive of all children. To foster play in inclusive settings, we need to rely upon the full range of perspectives on play that others have utilized successfully before us. One way to do that is to think about approaches to play along a continuum from nondirected to more directed, as suggested in the following diagram:

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nondirected play guided play directed play

Using this continuum, adults responsible for children's play become more or less involved depending upon the needs of the children playing. The very same teacher may be nondirected with some children, guide play with others, and direct the play of yet another group. At the same time, she or he may find it necessary to adapt her participation in the children's play further, depending upon the type of play they are engaged in.

While such a continuum maximizes the options for intervention available to professionals, we recognize that it also presents us with challenges. As early childhood educators, steeped in traditional thinking about the sacred domain of play and embarking on efforts to make our settings more inclusive, we will be challenged by a new scenario in which play is no longer a natural given for all children. Those of us who are early childhood special educators and therapists steeped in behaviorism and direct instruction to ensure children's learning will be challenged by another group of children new to us, for whom play happens spontaneously and more richly without adult intervention. Together as inclusionists relying on the strengths of each other's perspectives and practices, we can make play work for all the children in our group.

## How Should Play Look in Inclusive Settings?

A closer look at inclusive settings and the children enrolled in them is a beginning point for deciding how play should be incorporated. Generally speaking, inclusive early childhood settings welcome all young learners into their programs, are tailored to the specific population enrolled, and function as supportive communities for the adults as well as the children affiliated with them (adapted from Stainback and Stainback, 1992). They can be publicly or privately funded, follow one particular approach to educating young children (such as Montessori or HiScope) or be more eclectic, be organized for singular (such as nursery school) or multiple purposes (preschool, child care, parent-child groups, comprehensive services). Inclusive settings take on various forms, but the common theme among them is that all children are welcome as full and equal participants.

The young children enrolled in inclusive settings bring a range of physical attributes and psychological makeups, varied backgrounds and experiences, and a full complement of cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic abilities and needs. In addition, some children have been diagnosed with special educational needs resulting from disabilities or handicaps. With or without special needs, all are accepted as children with individual profiles who share some common requirements (a safe environment, nurturing adults, interesting and appropriate learning experiences) but who also deserve specific accommodations and supports based on their own needs (adaptive equipment, specialized instruction). Together, they form a community of learners, and in this paper, a community of playmates.

Given such a range of children within one setting, it becomes obvious that the team of professionals responsible for their care and education (whom we are calling inclusionists) needs an expansive perspective on play and a broad repertoire of strategies for facilitating play. Play, like other areas of child development, deserves our carefully shaped responses. That means addressing the inability of some children to initiate, enter, or sustain play and the likelihood of others to reciprocate appropriately.

Play in inclusive settings is still play. Although it is very difficult to define (Hughes, 1991), play is nonetheless easy to recognize when we see or experience it. If we observe children who are actively engaged and enjoying themselves, we assume that they are playing. Then, if we find they value the activity and have chosen to do it, we have further evidence that they are playing. Finally, if we note that they have their own rules for involvement, then we *know* they are playing. These same elements—active engagement, pleasure, intrinsic motivation, choice, spontaneity—are just as essential to play in inclusive settings.

As in other programs for young children, play in inclusive early childhood settings should provide children with ample opportunities to engage in different types of play, such as object, social, and sociodramatic play at different developmental stages (sensorimotor, constructive, dramatic, and rule governed) in a variety of social configurations—solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative (Heidemann and Hewitt, 1992). Furthermore, sufficient time (Christie and Wardle, 1992) and an abundant supply of real materials (Schickedanz, 1977) should be available to enrich children's play experiences.

What does children's play look like in inclusive settings? Observation would undoubtedly reveal individuals and small groups of youngsters in different sections of the room pursuing various activities or enacting various scenarios. Two or three children may be creating structures with manipulatives; several may be building in the block corner; another may be "cooking" in the playhouse, and yet others may be "en route to a magic castle in the sky." Whatever the play agenda, no doubt the environment has been carefully prepared by the early childhood practitioners to reflect the children's expressed interests and developmental levels. In addition, the practitioners have probably also planned ways to encourage and extend the children's thinking while they are playing.

The same developmentally appropriate practices that are incorporated in all high-quality early childhood programs are the foundation for play in inclusive settings. But integrated into such a play framework would be adaptive toys—with electronic switches and sound signals—to facilitate the participation of certain children, and social materials, such as parachutes, double easels, and floor puzzles, that would serve to enhance more interaction among children. (Many of these can be made or borrowed from toy libraries if they are not readily available in the program.)

The major difference we might see in an inclusive setting would be the more active role of adults in the children's play. For if we are to be true to our strong beliefs about the way in which children learn through play, we must ensure that every child develops play skills and engages in play with others. A more hands-off approach to play in inclusive settings would merely perpetuate the status quo for some children. A new framework for adult involvement must accompany an expanded perspective.

## How and When Should Inclusionists Intervene in Play?

Intervening to ensure that all children experience play in developmentally and individually appropriate ways is a complex task for inclusionists. In addition to being an observer of play, a preparer of the environment, a planner of activities, and a guide when children need one, the practitioner in an inclusive early childhood setting must also engage in ***delicately balancing intervention in play with letting play happen***. It is our belief that many children with whom our hands-off approach to play seemed to have worked could have gained more from play experiences had we intervened a bit, and that many children whom we felt needed our direct intervention could have benefited from our stepping back and watching more. This is not to say that we should be more involved only in the play of children with special needs. Clearly, there are children whom we have all known who were not disabled in any particular way but who had significant difficulties interacting, joining in, or maintaining play activities with their peers. They no more benefited from a less-directed approach to play than their peers with limitations. By the same token, there are some children with disabilities who, given an appropriate setting, interact, join in, and maintain play with their peers without our direct intervention. In reality, the approach to play that we use with various children should be determined by their play experiences in our settings rather than by their diagnoses or lack of them.

To decide when and how much to be involved in a child's play, we have found it helpful to think about types of intervention falling along a continuum similar to the one with a hands-off approach representing one end of the continuum, direct instruction representing the other, and a constructivist approach falling somewhere in between.

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| hands off<br>(less directive) | constructivist | direct instruction<br>(more directive) |

The inclusionist in an early childhood setting can then move along the continuum according to the needs of the children involved in play, being less directive when supports are not necessary and more directive when adult guidance enables participation, but always striving to manipulate the play environment and activities so that adult instruction is minimized. For example, in the block corner, where several children may be creating a replica of their neighborhood, it may seem at first glance that the only thing the teacher needs to do is to add a floor map to help children with the layout of the area. A subtle form of "scaffolding" the building experience, this intervention requires minimal additional adult involvement. However, as the play process continues, it may become obvious that other children need more assistance in organizing their involvement in the project, so the teacher may find it necessary to become more directive by helping these children decide where they will work or what role they might play. Finally, in an inclusive setting, it is likely that there will be at least one child who will require more direct instruction in the form of verbal directions or hand-over-hand assistance in order to contribute to the project. But not all children require the same amount of intervention and the early childhood inclusionist in this case will find it necessary to move back and forth along the continuum of intervention to ensure that all children who want to participate in the block project are able to do so successfully.

From our point of view, knowing when to intervene is as important as knowing how. Such decisions will usually depend on the individual children and specific play experiences involved, but we would also suggest that certain predicaments demand the immediate attention of adults nearby: children on the periphery of exciting games and interactions, those whose limitations make it difficult for them to interact, and those who are unsure of how to react to new or different overtures from peers. Not only must we continue to observe carefully and to assess the quality of play and social interactions in our settings, but we must also be prepared to move swiftly to facilitate the entry of the child who cannot race to the other end of the playground and to support the continuation of play by the child whose words may be unintelligible to his peers.

Finding the right balance between intervening to facilitate play and pulling back to allow play to develop naturally, once our supportive gestures are no longer needed, will be a new skill for many inclusionists. More and more play facilitation techniques have been developed and documented by researchers (Linder, 1990; Smith, 1992). Not only must "inclusionists" be able to utilize a number of play facilitation techniques, but they must also make careful judgments about which technique seems most appropriate for a play situation. We suggest enlisting the collaborative support of colleagues, especially therapists and parents, in trying to pinpoint where on the continuum of intervention children need our input. Ensuring that all children become players and yet allowing play themes to emerge from the children themselves will take the combined efforts of several adults. Just as the provision of integrated therapies has demanded that we figure out new forms of interprofessional teamwork, so too facilitating learning through play in inclusive settings also requires new collaborations. The diverse skills and training of various professionals in conjunction with the intimate knowledge that families have of their children will make it possible for professionals to support play adequately. Collaboration among professionals and families is crucial to play in inclusive early childhood programs, but a full discussion of its merits and pitfalls is beyond the scope of this paper. We would merely refer readers to the work of Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb (1994) and Woodruff and McGonigel (1988) as starting points for thinking about this element of play in inclusive settings.

## Supporting Inclusionists in Appropriate Play

The kind of interprofessional collaboration that we think is necessary to support play in inclusive settings requires that sufficient time and effort be devoted to teaming—time beyond that which is already devoted to planning together and coordinating with families. Extra time must also be allotted for sharing ideas, processing problems, and learning from each other. Without sufficient time for teaming, differences go unresolved, miscommunication results, and program quality suffers. In particular, we worry about two prevailing realities and warn about their potential destructiveness: First, teachers express concerns about the lack of time they have for professional responsibilities beyond the classroom (Marchant, 1995); second, inclusive settings are being created at a time when services and financial resources are being cut back (Beck, 1995). Maximizing children's play experiences in inclusive early childhood programs takes the combined expertise of educators, specialists, and families. Time must be set aside for this expertise to be shared, both when children are present and when they are not.

At this point, we also feel compelled to add briefly to current discussions on teacher preparation by supporting suggestions from others (Miller, 1992; Kemple, et. al., 1994) that call for unified professional preparation at the early childhood level. If we continue to train professionals in the traditional manner, which separates early childhood and early childhood special education, teaming and interprofessional collaboration will be a long time coming. Communicating and collaborating across disciplines must begin in training. As we have tried to show in this paper, facilitating play in inclusive settings requires multiple perspectives, intervention strategies, and roles for the adults involved. No one inclusionist can be expected to do it all, so while in training, early childhood professionals must grapple with their need to work with others. Making play happen for all young children is a complex task, one for teams of professionals and families.

## Benefits of Intervening in Child Play

Supporting play in inclusive settings has benefits for children and adults. All children can learn more by participating in play in inclusive settings. Increased ability to share, respect for differences, understanding their own and others' limitations as well as strengths, among other gains, help children to become more caring members of their programs. Participation in a learning community that values all its members, and includes, respects, and nurtures everyone has lifelong benefits. Increased opportunities to be helpmates and to seek help from others has immeasurable effects on self-esteem. To see oneself as both helper and helpee lends a balance to a realistic view of oneself in the world as someone with both strengths and needs. Additionally, learning to understand, accept, and include those who are different can go a long way in managing conflicts, which so often result from misunderstanding of differences. In short, the opportunity to learn moral and ethical lessons in the inclusive setting are immense. These are lessons that can be added to the already established list of cognitive, social, and other benefits of play in children's development.

Teachers as well gain by expanding their skills in facilitating play among more children. Like their students, they learn new perspectives, become more comfortable with what is new and different, and experience being supportive and supported by colleagues in a shared endeavor. Early childhood inclusionists who have incorporated such views of play into their programs have reached new levels of understanding—of play, of young children, and of themselves.

## 11

# Implementing Play in Hospitals: Values and Viewpoints

Joan Fernbach Kingson, M.Ed., C.C.L.S.
Instructor, Wheelock College

Richard H. Thompson, Ph.D., C.C.L.S.
Associate Professor, Wheelock College

Kimberly Eury Allen, M.S., C.C.L.S.
Director, Child and Adolescent Life Department
Children's Medical Center, Augusta, GA

Caroline Boettcher, M.A., Ed.M.
Child Life Specialist; Coordinator, Early Intervention Program
Bellevue Hospital, New York, NY.

Tom Collins, M.A., C.C.L.S.
Senior Child Life Specialist
Children's Hospital Oakland, Oakland, CA.

Joy Goldberger, M.S., C.C.L.S.
Senior Child Life Specialist,
Johns Hopkins Children's Center, Baltimore, MD.

Throughout students' preparation for work with children and families, a number of variables interact to shape their overall views of play and their ultimate application of play in their practice. These include the information they acquire about its benefits, the messages they receive from multiple sources about its importance, and the models of its use to which they are exposed. As educators, an important part of our role is to identify these variables and to try to understand their potential impact on student practice. This is true for the education of teachers of young children and for the professionals whom we prepare—child life specialists. Child life specialists are members of the pediatric health care team who work with children and their families promoting normal development and facilitating coping and adjustment to illness, hospitalization and health care treatment. This is accomplished through such approaches as use of play, preparation for impending medical events, and provision of support to family members.

For the 1995 Child Life Council Conference on Professional Issues held in Boston, we were invited to form a panel to examine critical issues regarding play in the practice of child life. We did so by inviting four currently practicing child life specialists to debate questions about the use of play in today's health care settings. Our goal was to highlight and examine how the dramatic and rapid changes in health care delivery have impacted choices made by child life practitioners in their use of play.

During the past decade, child life specialists have adapted their practice within a climate of unprecedented change in health care. At a time when the population of hospitalized children is more acutely ill than ever before, the average length of stay has declined dramatically. For the child life specialist and all other health professionals, this translates into far less time to work with much sicker hospitalized children. Parallel change has taken place in outpatient services. Increasing numbers of children now receive complex health intervention on an ambulatory basis. These circumstances, both inpatient or outpatient, provide limited opportunity for child life contact and intervention.

In planning the panel discussion, we developed two questions to generate active debate concerning the best approaches to structuring and supporting child life play practice within this new health care system. Each participant was asked to take an identified position on one of these questions and to develop that position into a brief paper.

The first question addressed by panelists relates to the tasks and functions most appropriate for senior or experienced child life specialists. More specifically, should the practice of these individuals have a traditional, playroom-based focus, or should they adopt a more diversified, "restructured" role with emphasis on specific, medically oriented interventions such as preparation for, or support during, procedures? Kim Eury Allen presented a viewpoint advocating the traditional role, while Tom Collins argued for the restructured role.

The second question concerns the type of involvement the child life specialist should have in the play provided for children in health care settings. That is, should play be nondirective, with the adult following the lead of the child, or should play consist of the adult actively guiding the child through anticipated, challenging medical events? Caroline Boettcher addressed the first of these viewpoints, while Joy Goldberger argued for the latter.

By asking these questions, we intended to identify extreme philosophical and practical positions. Although current child life practice lies somewhere on the continuum between the extremes, there is considerable, and possibly increasing, variation in play practice among existing child life programs. In organizing this panel, we wanted to discuss and examine these differences because they have such important implications for how our students will understand and support play in their future work. As educators, we appreciate and understand how central the clinical internship is in determining a student's knowledge and practice related to play. The more we know about current thinking and practice in the field, the better positioned we will be to develop integrated and comprehensive coursework and programs.

## Question 1: What Is the Most Appropriate Role for Senior Child Life Staff?

### Viewpoint: Senior staff should have a traditional, playroom-based focus.

While playing with playdough one evening on the rehabilitation unit with a small group of patients, I engaged in a conversation with eight-year-old Darnell. Darnell had been in the hospital for about five months with a sudden, acute illness that had left him paralyzed from the waist down. He was working hard at smashing playdough into the "fun factory" when I asked him about what special was going to happen tomorrow. He continued smashing the playdough and in a matter-of-fact way stated, "I am going home… and I don't want to go."

I grabbed my shovel and started to dig. "You don't want to go home after being here for so long?" Darnell continued to play with the playdough. He never looked up, vigorously cutting the dough "snakes" into tiny little pieces. I kept digging. "Is there a reason why you don't want to go home?" Darnell then started into the story of his mom being a drug dealer. He explained in detail about how drugs and money came in and out of the house. I had spent considerable time with Darnell for five months, but he waited until the day before discharge to divulge his secret.

I use this example to illustrate the importance of experienced staff in a playroom setting. What if a volunteer, a new student, or an inexperienced staff member had failed to recognize the importance of his comment? What if this person had responded to the same situation by saying, "Well, of course you want to go home. All kids want to go home"? Would he have opened up? Would this person have read the cues that something else may have been going on?

Why is it essential to have experienced child life staff facilitating play in the playroom? Play is a window on development that permits us to look inside of the patient. By providing developmentally appropriate activities and toys for patients, trained staff can assess the child's understanding and, perhaps, his misconceptions of hospitalization or illness. They can identify the child's preferred coping strategies and observe social skills and patient interactions in a group. Without adequate training or experience, the student, volunteer, or novice staff member may overlook key aspects of development, fail to notice misconceptions, and miss the child's expression of coping skills.

Playrooms provide nonthreatening oases in a sometimes very threatening and strange health care environment. By providing a nonthreatening setting free of medical procedures, trained staff can see the patient in a child-oriented environment filled with familiar objects—a setting where children are most likely to be themselves. Because of this climate, staff can establish rapport with the patient, recognize verbal and nonverbal cues and signs of stress, and learn about the patient's style and personality. With the advent of shorter hospital stays, the time to establish rapport and trust with patients has diminished. Therefore, it is even more necessary that experienced staff be involved in such playroom interventions.

Without extensive understanding of children's reactions to stress, many cues may go undetected. The experienced staff person has the ability to establish rapport and recognize clues, such as Darnell's vigorous cutting of snakes. Recognition is the first step in the process; this is followed by intervention to address the identified issues (e.g., comments by the adult that "open the door" for Darnell to talk about his feelings). A student, volunteer, or novice staff member may need assistance both in identifying the issue and in addressing it. The procedure-free playroom is the best place to assess the emotional status of children, for it is the most naturalistic area in the hospital or health care setting—the place where they are most comfortable being themselves.

We staff the playroom with experienced personnel in order that they may interact with patients through the mode of play. By providing play opportunities in this setting, there is much that trained staff members can accomplish. For example, they can facilitate normal development and behavior in the often strange hospital environment. They can provide medical play to assist children in their problem solving about, and mastery of, health care experiences. They can provide opportunities for a variety of forms of play—functional, dramatic, or goal oriented, parallel, group, or solitary. They can address developmental issues through play and encourage expression of feelings. They can observe family interactions within the playroom.

Volunteers and new students are typically effective in engaging children in normal, diversionary activities, such as board games or drawing. However, trained staff are essential for creating the *therapeutic* component of play. Experienced child life specialists are familiar with medical procedures and development and are knowledgeable about effective ways of communicating with children. Seasoned child life specialists have the ability to lead group activities while attending to individual needs. By staffing a playroom with a volunteer or student (who may lack the experience or knowledge of health care), children's misconceptions regarding the hospital experience may not be addressed in a way that facilitates their understanding.

The trained child life specialist can look through the developmental window to interact with the patient through the mode of play in a nonthreatening environment. When making decisions about staffing, it is essential to consider the placement of a senior child life specialist in this traditional playroom role. Only by placing senior staff in this, the most naturalistic environment that the hospital offers, can one maximize the opportunity to obtain accurate insight into children's development and to facilitate their coping with health care experiences.

Given today's tight resources, it is increasingly important to go back to the basics of a child life program and its roots in the playroom. In short, it is time to take "play" off of the "four-letter word" list. Instead of being "stuck in the playroom," perhaps we need to change our thinking to "having the opportunity to provide patients and families with the opportunity and space to play" in the health care environment.

**Viewpoint: Senior child life staff should adopt a "restructured" role.**

The question at hand is whether the experienced child life specialist should devote primary attention to management of the playroom and facilitation of the overall therapeutic environment or, rather, delegate playroom management to less-trained staff and devote greater attention to focused interactions. The preceding viewpoint argued the merits of senior staff adopting a traditional, playroom-focused role. This role is typically characterized by assignment of the child life specialist to a single inpatient, acute-care unit. This individual organizes and implements playroom activities and supervises volunteers and students who assist in the providing of play experiences for patients. A primary focus of this work is to build relationships with children through the use of appropriate activities. The child life specialist then builds upon those relationships to stimulate communication that in turn promotes mastery of the health care experience. A traditional playroom-based program such as this is typically available to all children in a given unit, without selection based on their emotional need, and receives no funds on a fee-for-service basis.

A "restructured" role for child life specialists differs from the traditional one in several important respects. Duties within the program are assigned by a careful evaluation of the skills and experience individuals bring to the program and by matching these qualities with the demands of various tasks. The overall supervision of playroom activities and of volunteers is given to personnel at the level of child life assistant. This assignment of responsibilities allows senior staff to devote their time to other activities commensurate with their training and experience. These activities may include scheduled interactions with individual patients, such as preparation for surgery or other medical procedures, as well as support during these or other stressful events. Patients receiving these interventions are frequently identified and their needs prioritized through assessment by the child life specialist.

The evolution of child life to the "restructured" role reflects greater changes occurring in pediatric care. Even as the delivery of health care must respond to changing times, so must the profession of child life. Although there is certainly variation among health care settings, overall there has been an increase in the acuity level of hospitalized patients. This results from our greater ability to intervene with severely ill children than in decades past, as well as from the diversion of less severely ill children to other than hospital settings for their treatment.

As a result, the individual children we see in hospitals today are sicker than ever before. Moreover, children with profound medical problems represent a higher percentage of the patients on each unit. These children often have chronic illnesses and complex family issues. These children may not even be able to visit the playroom. Despite the acuity of their conditions, children are being discharged from the hospital more rapidly than in the past. At the same time, the roles of caregivers serving these children have changed significantly, with each providing more limited, specialized forms of care.

A number of other changes in the health care system have affected the practice of child life, some in a positive way. For example, hospital environments have become more child and family focused. Parents rooming in with their hospitalized child is accepted now as a standard of care. Parents are often allowed to be with their children during induction of anesthesia and in the recovery room following surgery. Our culture has changed, albeit slowly at times, in terms of parents and health care professionals encouraging active participation by children in their own care.

Even as the psychosocial environment of hospitals has improved, these institutions' fiscal resources have been stretched. Under constant pressure to constrain costs, hospital administrators are challenged to allocate their resources in the most cost-effective manner. In response, they seek to maximize the impact caregivers have on their patients, and they seek to facilitate leadership roles for staff members.

As child life specialists, we wear many hats in the course of our work. Nevertheless, if we are asked to identify our primary role, the most likely response is that we are facilitators of the child's mastery of health care encounters. In the current health care climate, the crucial question we must answer for ourselves is, "What is the most effective method of providing this service?" In answering this question, we may discover that our approach to child life must change drastically, as some programs have already done. If our choice is to staff our program differently, to have less skilled staff provide playroom management and the most skilled staff provide "focused" interactions, then what are the benefits of this approach?

Focused interactions help define more clearly child life's role in the rapidly changing health care environment. How often are we asked, "What is child life?" If I am preparing a child with a fractured femur to receive a spica cast, the child, family, and staff easily comprehend my purpose. Focused interactions target outcomes that translate directly into improved patient care and patient satisfaction—outcomes that are measurable, documentable, and important to patients, staff, and administrators alike. Through focused interventions, child life professionals become more connected to specific health care teams (e.g., a particular subspecialty such as hematology/oncology). That team may then consider child life to be an integral part of their service. As the foregoing suggests, focused interactions are likely to be more easily defended in times of budgetary crisis.

A reality of health care today is that children are seen for shorter periods of time, have more medical intrusions during that time, and encounter a broader range of medical personnel, each for brief intervals. This situation has several implications for our practice. First, it increases the necessity for preparing children for the multiple, stressful episodes they face. It also decreases our opportunity to develop long-term relationships with children and families, the foundation upon which child life has built its practice in the past. Finally, the fact that children will encounter many individuals over the course of their health care experiences suggests the need to share our skills and methods of interaction with others on the health care team. As we provide focused interactions, we have a greater opportunity to model a style of interaction for others—one that is participatory, involving, and developmentally based.

It should be noted that play is not lost under the "restructured" model of child life. In fact, play is essential to this approach. It is the medium through which we assess children; it is the medium through which intervention is provided. Through "focused intervention," we assess the child and then pursue a course of action. General developmental and diversional play can be provided through child life assistants, who can be supervised by senior staff to provide an environment that is both safe and therapeutic.

We may accept the argument that focused interactions assist with staffing and program management, yet the question each of us should ask ourselves is, "How does this change affect the children and families we serve? Does it improve the care they receive?" A model that emphasizes focused interactions provides a greater opportunity for us to be with the children who need us the most at the time they need us the most. The acknowledgment of a child's birthday is important, but if preparation for the celebration must occur at the same time that we are needed to prepare a child for an imminent bone marrow aspiration, how should we spend our time? If we provide skilled, focused interactions and preparations, there is a greater likelihood that the "at risk" children will venture out of their patient rooms and test the waters of the playroom. Given the climate of health care today, it is time for child life to maximize our impact on the patient population we serve.

## Question 2: Should the Child Life Specialist's Role in Play be Nondirective or Directive?

### Viewpoint: The child life specialist should use nondirected therapeutic play

Nondirected therapeutic play is a valuable tool for child life specialists in many settings. Therapeutic play in general provides a means for communicating with children who have difficulty speaking directly about their concerns. The goals of therapeutic play are to foster normal growth and development, to give children safe opportunities to make sense of their world by exploring and problem solving, and to invite children to express their feelings about their experiences, whether real or imagined.

Two key elements in therapeutic play are the materials used and the role of the practitioner. Nondirected therapeutic play is characterized by the child as the active initiator of spontaneous play. The adult, in turn, adopts the role of a participant-observer whose behavior is responsive to and guided by the child's actions. The focus of nondirected therapeutic play is for children to guide the content, direction, and pace of the therapeutic process, while practitioners take the roles of observer, mediator, and interpreter.

In nondirected therapeutic play, child life specialists carefully choose play materials for children but do not suggest how they are to be used. It is necessary to provide children with different types of toys, ranging from specific medical equipment to more open-ended materials such as paper and crayons, puppets, dolls, and clay, all of which allow for symbolic play. Giving children a choice of objects will offer them a sense of control and mastery, as well as provide them a language of choice with which to communicate. In contrast, directing the play by limiting the availability of creative toys or guiding children to act out themes that an adult has guessed may be of concern can be more detrimental than helpful and is not necessarily therapeutic.

A hallmark of nondirected therapeutic play is meeting children where they are developmentally. By assuming a less controlling role in guiding the play, child life specialists can help children reflect on and learn about concerns that arise from their play. It is important that staff actively observe children's spontaneous play to uncover what they understand about their own situations instead of presuming that they know what the children need to know. For example, if a child life specialist is too quick to show a child how a fingerprick is performed for a blood test by modeling the procedure on a doll, he or she may miss an opportunity to see how the child has imagined the experience. Perhaps this child thinks the doctor is going to take out all of his blood or that he will be painfully poked many, many times. These are things the child may not be able to verbalize while watching a demonstration of a procedure but can communicate through play with the doll and equipment. Perhaps showing the procedure to the child provides more information than the child wants to know or can understand. Perhaps this child only wants his mother to hold him while he looks away from the doctor. This child may become more fearful by visualizing what will occur. It is imperative that child life specialists follow the lead of the children they work with to help them cope with their specific situations.

Knowledge about child development can help child life specialists support children in age-appropriate ways. For example, younger children need a hands-on, motoric means of expression, while older children are more developmentally equipped, mentally and emotionally, to use symbolic and pretend play. But all children need available expressive opportunities in all modalities. A ten-year-old child may only be able to express his anger through pounding playdough, and a two-year-old child may need to provide herself a symbolic sense of security by covering up her doll with a blanket. The role of adults in nondirected therapeutic play, then, is to carefully watch children as they play, picking out themes that the children act out, and following their cues to assist them in assimilating those themes into their treatment.

Nondirected therapeutic play provides the children an opportunity to work through feelings that they identify and that they are prepared to handle. Within this play, adults do not impose specific themes based on what they believe to be relevant to the children at that particular time. The unstructured format allows the children to explore and express their own concerns as those arise. If child life specialists impose their own interpretations on children, they risk cutting off communication instead of fostering it by making children feel as if they are misunderstood. For example, even a seemingly supportive comment, such as "You must have been scared," can suggest to children that they may not be sufficiently competent to handle a situation. If the child life specialist listens instead to the child through such play signals as hiding or running away, he or she can help the child interpret personal actions and feelings by identifying the symbolic message. This child-centered approach places children in control by offering them a language for their expectations, fantasies, and fears, which adults can then interpret to support with further reflection and education.

In summary, nondirected therapeutic play is an open-ended approach of communicating with children that can be used for short- and long-term encounters. The intent of the therapeutic play will dictate the time and materials necessary. In the ideal situation, there is ample time for many interactions between children and child life specialists to establish relationships in which the children are comfortable with expressing their strongest fears. It may take time for children's fears to become conscious. Therapeutic play, after all, is a *process*. I have, however, seen nondirected play used successfully with children in far less than ideal circumstances, such as in those anticipatory moments prior to being wheeled into an operating room.

Child life specialists need to remember that play is, after all, the way children learn about themselves and their world. It is not our job to directly tell them how to do it, but instead to support this important process.

### Viewpoint: The child life specialist should use guided play.

I will state my central point circuitously: when caring for children in potentially stressful health care settings, choosing not to address impending unfamiliar or potentially challenging situations through guided play borders on negligent child life practice. This is not a statement I make lightly. However, I believe that the delivery of health care services has changed so dramatically that only a dramatic rethinking of child life values and practice is appropriate at this time.

Spontaneous play has served in a meaningful capacity for decades, and our intense valuing and enabling of such play recognizes the crucial role of both expression of and victory (even if only in fantasy) over overwhelming experiences. Historically, observing such play has guided our assessments and interventions. Times, however, have changed.

We have lost our previous "touch points" in health care settings. Sometimes, it seems, we can barely interact at all, much less rely on extended unstructured times in which children's emotional themes can unfold. Given these changes, we have two choices. Simply stated, these are to (1) address issues or (2) "not." Only if we choose the route of addressing issues through guided play can we enable psychological preparation and "working-through" play, and thus potential mastery for child and parents.

Through the research literature, we know that the value of psychological preparation and planned coping interventions has been repeatedly documented. I don't believe any other treatment approach demonstrates such consistent benefits. If we as child life specialists then choose to leave play to children's spontaneous interests, play may or may not address their medical situation. If they avoid play that relates to health care, then we deny the child the opportunity for "stress-point care," with its repeatedly documented benefits.

Our goal is not to *demonstrate* the technical aspects of a procedure or to bombard a child's psyche with inordinate attention to the stressful situation. Guiding children to play about recent or imminent events that are likely to overwhelm them allows us to join them, explores more satisfying coping strategies, and helps them to enjoy a greater sense of mastery.

Children whose play most actively avoids direct expression or revisiting of difficult experiences may be just the children in greatest need of assistance. Procedures will occur no matter how vigorously children work to avoid them, and allowing this to occur without an appropriately sized dose of "planned coping" leaves children just as vulnerable and unprepared to master these situations as they were in the past.

Even if children choose to play about health care themes, they can't know how to play about impending, unknown situations and dilemmas. If, indeed, children select medical themes in their play, playing without professional adult guidance about what is imagined might actually be far worse than reality and serve to heighten anxiety. Similarly, if spontaneous play revisits past difficult health care experiences without guidance, unresolved conflicts and ineffective coping patterns may also be revisited and rehearsed without the benefit of trying out more comfortable, satisfying methods.

Furthermore, child life services are not likely to be available "later," when expressive play happens naturally. With briefer hospital stays, children's expressive play about challenging medical encounters will now occur almost exclusively outside the health care setting, after children return home. They are too sick or too overwhelmed to do this within today's health care setting. Both hospital contacts and clinic visits are typically too intense and too short for expressive play to casually unfold. In addition, reduced child life staffing, which has resulted in the necessity of fewer child life staff caring for more and sicker children in more locations, means that we must streamline our skills and work style and make a point of "getting to the point."

Now to state my point: only guided play can truly assist in preparing for, or working through, complex health care encounters. This is particularly true in our current climate, where those health care encounters are brief and intense. This holds equally true in acute care, specialty care, and primary care settings. Only psychological preparation with planned coping offers the opportunity to rehearse new, or reinforce tentative, coping strategies. Enhanced coping has obvious benefits. It has the potential to impact the child's and family's evolving self-concept and their ability to cope in future similar situations. Perhaps less obvious is its impact on parent's perception of their own efficacy and of their child's resilience, again with great potential benefits for their interactions in health care settings and beyond. In addition, when serving in this capacity, child life specialists have the opportunity to interface with health care providers from all disciplines in shaping attitudes about meaningful health care participation.

This may mean that our role has changed. We may need to espouse a new professionalism. We must take a more active role in order to be proactive. We must commit to and work for more finely honed skills. At times, we may need to be less of a "friend" and more of an assertive guide for children, more of a mentor for parents.

In summary, allow me to let Elena speak for me. She is a four year old with a complex and rare genitourinary birth defect. We got to know each other when I was informed that she was about to be catheterized, that her parents were distraught and anxious and believed that clinic staff would never get her to cooperate, and that she would be traumatized. She did beautifully, thanks to preparation with planned coping. With many telephone calls from and some very specific guidance to her parents over the phone and a quick preparation session on the morning of her subsequent surgery, she coped well again. However, there were many complications during her lengthy recovery, and she became more stressed and anxious. In clinic visits, she came often, was "needy," and I seemed to have contact with her only in a general play, "group setting" kind of way. When, after several weeks, I was finally able to spend some time in focused, guided play, her mother reports that upon leaving the clinic Elena firmly stated, "Now *that* was good play."

## Implications for the Training of Students

Every student who will practice child life must address the question that Elena apparently answered through her comment—What is good play for children in health care settings? Is it supportive, developmental play offered by experienced personnel in group settings, or a more targeted, "focused" interaction that occurs around specific medical events? Is it play that is directed by the child and gradually unfolds under the child life specialist's watchful eye, or is it activity guided by the adult around potential medical stressors?

The viewpoints presented above represent the extreme positions that panel members were asked to defend. These forms of play are not mutually exclusive and certainly may be offered within a single program, although programs tend to fall toward one end of the continuum or the other. "Good play," simply stated, is play that most appropriately addresses a child's needs at a given point in time. Behind this simple statement, of course, are complex issues that challenge our capacity to provide such play. To blend the approaches discussed in the viewpoints takes an institution that promotes flexibility in the services it offers and that provides adequate resources for responding to the needs of individuals. It also takes child life professionals who have high-level skills. These individuals must recognize that the play needs of children in health care settings change not only day to day, but hour to hour. They must be skilled at knowing how to persist in interactions with children and when to hold back. They must be skilled in active involvement with children and at observation from a distance. Ultimately, the type and level of care they provide must be determined by their assessment of the unique set of variables affecting each child.

A fundamental challenge in the preparation of child life students is to foster these skills and to promote the capacity to make informed, defensible judgments concerning the use of play. This task becomes even more difficult and critical in an era when child life programs are routinely being asked to make choices about the services they provide and to justify the choices they make. It is a challenging task to prepare students to make choices about future practice at a time when the direction of health care is so uncertain. Nevertheless, there are steps that we as educators may take to help students make more informed choices when the situation arises. We offer four such steps:

1) *Provide basic information on the value of play.* An underlying assumption of the viewpoints presented above is that play is of value to the lives of children. Students should be aware of the cognitive, physical, social, and psychosocial benefits of play to the lives of children. This awareness should be fostered through coursework and reinforced through assignments and experiences encountered in their field experiences.

2) *Help students recognize the forces impacting [illegible]y of play in health care settings.* While personal beliefs may inf[illegible] the practitioner's use of play in health care settings, other factors within the system may also affect how and when play is offered to children. The viewpoints illustrate a number of these factors. For example, economics will dictate the extent of resources that are available for play. Medical practice and the physical condition of children will influence their ability to participate in certain forms of play. Social and political factors within institutions will shape prevailing attitudes about the basic value of providing play experiences. Students must understand how health care systems operate and how these various factors influence the choices available to them.

3) *Help students evaluate the models of practice they encounter through their field placements.* As the viewpoints indicate, extremely divergent models exist for the practice of child life. During their training, students are likely at best to experience only a few of these directly. As educators, we must help them place their field experiences in a broader context. When encountering programs that either promote or seemingly de-emphasize play, we can help them examine the benefits and trade-offs of each approach.

4) *Foster among students an informed questioning of their practice.* Whatever one's beliefs about play and whatever mode of service delivery one encounters, it is certain that circumstances will change in the structure and practice of health care. Many of those changes will challenge the beliefs and practices of those providing services. Rather than being feared, this condition should be valued. We should encourage continual examination of practice among child life students. What is it that we are trying to accomplish? How are we going about it? Is our practice most appropriate, given the needs of the families with whom we work and the systems

within which we work? Through such an examination, we may find that we reaffirm commitment to old beliefs and approaches or that we need to change.

A final by-product of our participation in this discussion of play was our increased awareness of the value of gathering practitioners to exchange viewpoints. We seek to model for our students a deliberative and thoughtful approach to the practice of child life. Nevertheless, given the rapidity of change in health care, decisions about the reorganization of services are being made by individual programs with limited opportunity for discussion with colleagues elsewhere and with limited time to articulate the assumptions and rationale underlying the changes. This panel offered the opportunity for child life specialists to exchange viewpoints, to consider the circumstances they and other colleagues face, and to deliberately examine the manner in which their beliefs are put into practice.

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Joy Goldberger, Johns Hopkins Children's Center, Baltimore, MD

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